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Faith in Action for Social Justice



REIMAGINING The Bible Belt

Despite changing demographics in Texas,
faith-based organizers are still battling
ghosts of the Old South.

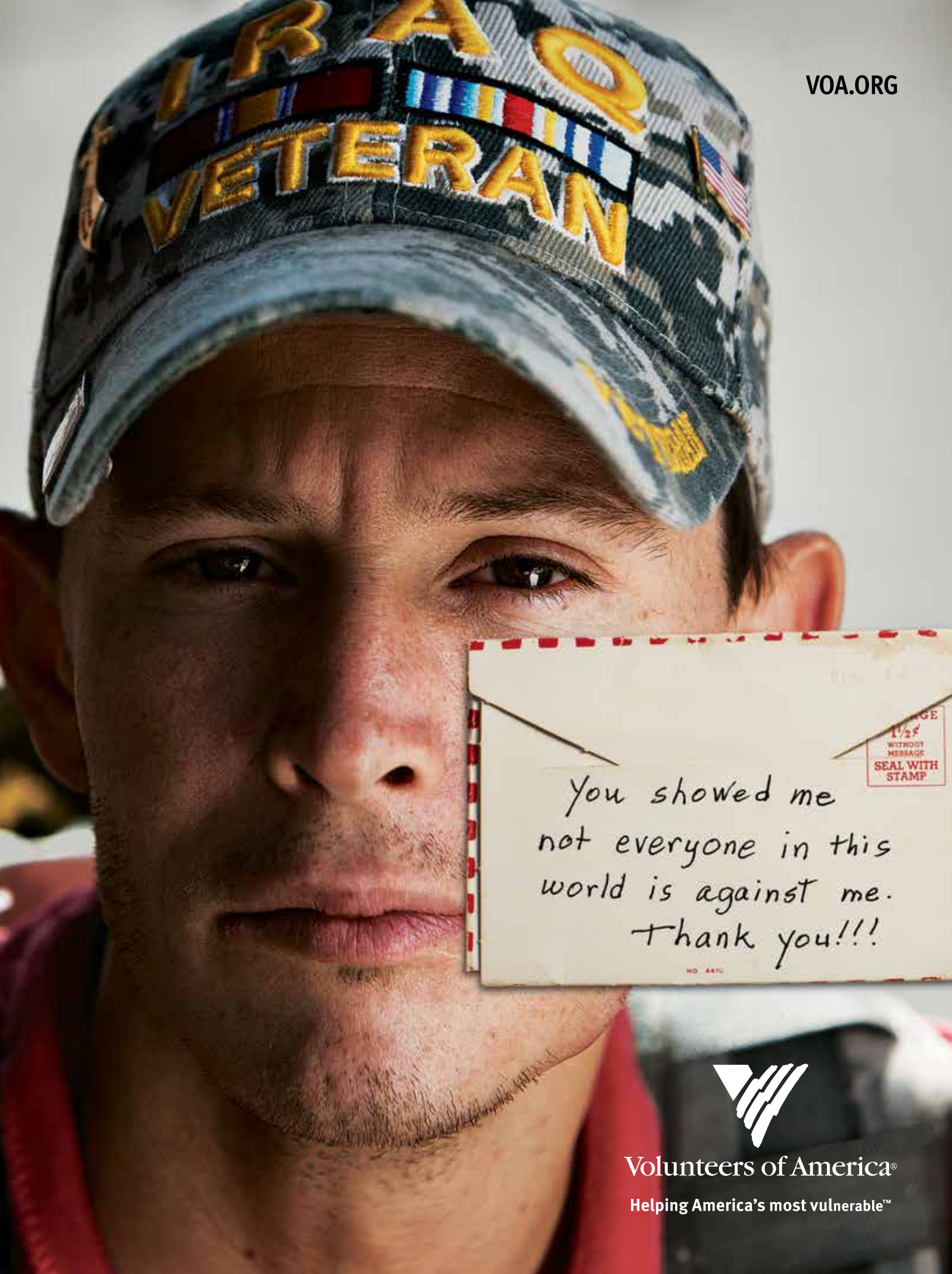
PLUS:

Julia Alvarez on feel-good activism
Black families: 'A miracle of resilience'
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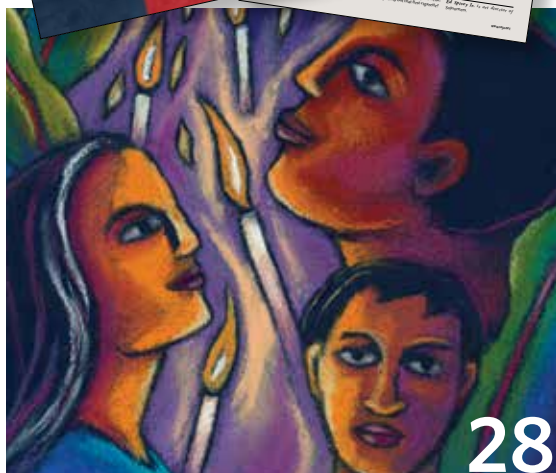
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WHEN PRESIDENT OBAMA announced last December that it was time for a “new approach” to U.S. relations with Cuba, headlines speculated about the possibility of imported cigars and classic cars. In this issue, Fran Quigley suggests the U.S. should import a different Cuban resource: top-quality, low-cost medical care. Rooted in preventative, community-based strategies, this Cuban approach shows why access to excellent health shouldn’t be a topic for debate.

Community-based strategies have also been key for faith leaders in Texas working to create a new narrative about faith and public life in the Bible Belt. But as organizers Danielle Ayers and Lydia Bean discovered, before Latino, African-American,

and Anglo pastors from Dallas could work together to address racial and economic injustice, they had to take a hard look at their city’s history of white supremacy—and the “theological defense system” that has kept it in place.

Another way we can root out white supremacy is by examining the racial and economic privilege that often shapes our understanding of an “ideal” family. Instead

of relying on thin caricatures of “the black family”—single mothers, absent fathers, at-risk youth, and dominating matriarchs—we need to look at the historic pressures and systemic factors in which these families have been forged, explains Lisa Sharon Harper. Set in this context, the story of black families is a miracle of resilience, not failure.

This summer Sojourners is hosting its second annual Summit, a three-day convening of more than 300 leaders committed to changing the world through faith and justice. The goal of The Summit is simple: Be encouraged. Social change requires sustained, difficult work, and deep-rooted relationships with others on the journey will always be among our key resources. ■

Letters

DIRTY SECRETS EXPOSED

The “dirty secrets” in Emilie Teresa Smith’s excellent piece “Oh Canada!” (May 2015) are no secret to Canadians of faith, who have been advocating for change in mining practices for years. Last November at St. Paul’s University in Ottawa, 200 people gathered for a conference titled “The Global Cry of the People: Mining Extraction and Justice,” featuring expert speakers from Canadian Aboriginal communities as well as activists affected by mining in the global South. (A highlight of the event was the granting of an honorary doctorate to Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez.) Those present called upon Canada’s government to do two things: Create an independent extractive-sector ombudsman in Canada, and provide legislated access to Canadian courts for people harmed by international operations of Canadian companies. This struggle continues.

Joe Gunn

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

DIVESTING FROM MINING

Many thanks to Emilie Teresa Smith (May 2015) for witnessing to the costly impacts of Canadian mining companies borne by Indigenous and impoverished people around the world. As Christians, we must not ignore that churches in Canada and

We should always seek to hear the stories of others—all others—and learn from them.

the U.S. are complicit through their investments in mining companies. Many of us in the United Church of Canada are responding to the call of our partners in Guatemala and are asking the United Church Pension Board to divest from Goldcorp. Learn more at www.marconf.ca/resources/treasure.

Kathryn Anderson

Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia, Canada

ACCESSIBLE CHRISTIANITY

I wish to thank Susan Windley-Daoust for her article “Beyond the Wheelchair Ramp” (May 2015). As someone born with right-side paralysis in the 1940s, I know the frustration of being thought of as less by the general population. My parents were told that I would never walk and never be able to care for myself, and that I would likely be “retarded.” But my parents did not listen to those warnings and gave me the opportunity for as normal of a life as anyone else. While I have struggled in some ways physically, also becoming a Type 1 diabetic in my teens, I was an athlete long before the Special Olympics came along.

I have been active in ministry since

the mid-’80s, after finishing a career as a rehab counselor. I mainly worked in parish ministry, where I encouraged the congregants to welcome *all*. I decry the fact that churches are exempt from being “accessible,” under ADA regulations, and I have appreciated congregations that go out of their way to make their churches available and welcoming.

I appreciate the author’s insistence that the abled “listen” to those with disabilities, for everyone experiences disability differently. Too often people are much like the “Western Christians,” treating those with disabilities as less, at best. It is unconscionable that 90 percent of people living with disabilities are unchurched. We should always seek to hear the stories of others—all others—and learn from them.

Stephen Nelms

Hartwell, Georgia

Thumbs up! (Or down.) Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, Sojourners, 3333 14th St. NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20010. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.

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In a secular world increasingly torn apart by extremism,

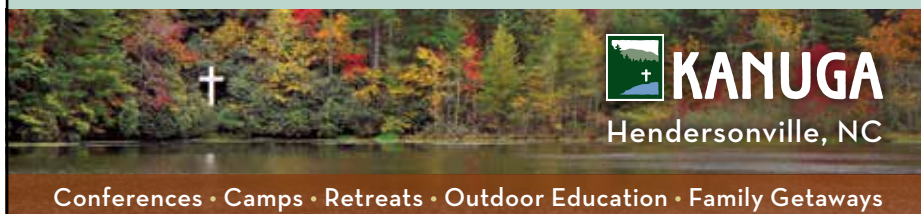


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BY JIM WALLIS

Nuclear Summer



AS YOU READ this column, diplomats from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, Germany, and the European Union are working with their Iranian counterparts to finalize a deal concerning Iran's nuclear program. I strongly believe that Christians should support the framework for this deal, announced in Lausanne, Switzerland, on April 2, as the best chance to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear-armed state and—equally important—the best chance for the United States to avoid armed conflict with Iran.

In the days following the announcement of this framework, Sojourners authored and published a statement of support, which was signed by more than 50 Christian leaders (see page 12). Part of that statement reads as follows: "It is the sacred responsibility of all those entrusted with political power

late May, the parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, at their every-five-years review conference, failed to agree on how to move forward. But as President Obama said regarding the NPT, "The basic bargain is sound: Countries with nuclear weapons will move toward disarmament, countries without nuclear weapons will not acquire them, and all countries can access peaceful nuclear energy." Enforcing the second clause of this argument—namely, preventing new countries from acquiring nuclear weapons—is diligently being pursued in the Iran negotiations, and we should rightly support that. However, people of faith and conscience worldwide need to push much more forcefully toward the goal of nuclear-armed countries such as the United States and Russia truly moving toward eventual disarmament.

The Cold War may have come and gone, but its legacy lives on in the roughly 16,000 nuclear weapons that remain throughout the world. The detonation of any one of these weapons, whether accidental or intentional, would have profound humanitarian, ecological, and moral costs that we can only guess at. Progress has been made since the height of the arms race—at one time there were approximately 70,000 nuclear weapons worldwide—but the reality is that those that remain still have the potential to wipe out humanity many times over.

POPE FRANCIS has insightfully pointed out that nuclear weapons represent not only a threat to the human race but a perpetuation of global economic inequality. "Spending on nuclear weapons squanders the wealth of nations," the pope wrote last December. "To prioritize such spending is a mistake and a misallocation of resources which would

be far better invested in the areas of integral human development, education, health, and the fight against extreme poverty. When these resources are squandered, the poor and the weak living on the margins of society pay the price."

Right now, the United States is planning to spend \$1 trillion over the next decade to modernize its nuclear arsenal. When some of our political leaders support this spending in the same breath as they call for cuts to programs that serve our most vulnerable citizens in the name of deficit reduction, we need to name that for the moral hypocrisy that it is.

We also need to move beyond the resigned acceptance and complacency that has characterized for too many our attitudes toward nuclear weapons. President Obama perhaps said it best in his 2009 speech in Prague: "Some argue that the spread of these weapons cannot be stopped, cannot be checked—that we are destined to live in a world where more nations and more people possess the ultimate tools of destruction. Such fatalism is a deadly adversary, for if we believe that the spread of nuclear weapons is inevitable, then in some way we are admitting to ourselves that the use of nuclear weapons is inevitable."

Of course, the United States has a particular moral duty to lead the way, as the only nation ever to have used nuclear weapons in war. This August will mark the 70th anniversary of the United States' destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Our nation should mark this solemn occasion with a new commitment to be not just the country that brought nuclear weapons into the world, but also the country that led the world to abolish them. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

The Cold War may have come and gone, but its legacy lives on.

to pursue, with patient perseverance, every option that makes the destruction of war less possible, in order to protect human life and dignity. This becomes an even more urgent moral and spiritual imperative when we have the chance to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons, with their terrifying potential of mass destruction ... a goal that reflects the binding commitments made by 191 U.N. member states, including the United States, under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)."

A deal with Iran that prevents it from acquiring nuclear weapons is vitally important, but it should also be viewed through the broader lens of nuclear non-proliferation and, ultimately, disarmament. In

Marvin Recinos/AFP/Getty Images



Blessed Romero

On May 23, Archbishop Óscar Romero was “beatified” in the Catholic Church, a step in the process toward sainthood, at a ceremony in San Salvador. Romero, already considered by many to be the patron saint of the Americas, was assassinated in 1980 by order of Roberto D’Aubuisson, a Salvadoran military leader and founder of a right-wing political party. The U.S. funded the 1979 coup that installed a military regime in El Salvador and continues to provide asylum and protections to others implicated in Romero’s murder.

By David Cortright

A Good Deal Worth Protecting

The Iran Framework could be one of the most significant nuclear nonproliferation achievements in history.

IN APRIL, eight nations, including Iran, announced an agreement for addressing Iran’s controversial nuclear activities. The Iran Nuclear Framework, supported by many Christian leaders in the U.S., is seen as an opportunity to “dramatically restrain the capacity of Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.” It could be one of the most significant nonproliferation achievements in history.

The proposed agreement significantly reduces Iran’s capacity to enrich uranium, closes the plutonium path to weapons capacity, and greatly increases international monitoring and verification of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. It allows for lifting sanctions against Iran and opens the door to the possibility of improved bilateral relations.

The multiyear agreement sharply curtails Iran’s enrichment program. Iran has agreed to reduce by approximately two-thirds its installed centrifuges, from about 19,000 today to 6,104 under the deal. And Iran has agreed not to build any new facilities for the

purpose of enriching uranium for 15 years.

The agreement calls for redesigning Iran’s Arak heavy water reactor (so it does not produce weapons-grade plutonium), removing spent fuel from Iran, and banning reprocessing. Iran will ship all of its spent fuel from the reactor out of the country for the reactor’s lifetime. And Iran has committed indefinitely to not conduct reprocessing or reprocessing research and development on spent nuclear fuel.

THE AGREEMENT MANDATES intrusive international inspections, with unique provisions for prolonged transparency and accountancy measures. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will have regular access to all of Iran’s nuclear facilities and will install the most up-to-date, modern remote monitoring technologies.

Inspectors will have access to uranium mines and continuous surveillance at uranium mills for 25 years. Iran will be

required to grant the IAEA access to investigate suspicious sites or allegations of a covert enrichment facility, conversion facility, centrifuge production facility, or yellowcake production facility anywhere in the country. The U.S. says that IAEA inspectors will have access “anywhere in the country” to investigate suspicious nuclear activities. Iran says that the agreed provisions for onsite inspection and rigorous monitoring do not apply to active military bases.

The agreement will enable Iran to re-engage with the West economically and diplomatically—and this is the most politically contentious part of the plan. Iran and the U.S. have different interpretations of what re-engagement looks like.

Another point of contention is around sanctions. The White House states that U.S. and European Union nuclear-related sanctions will be suspended *after* the IAEA has verified that Iran has taken all of its key nuclear-related steps—and the U.S.

Our Mission

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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emphasizes that the sanctions can snap back into place if Iran fails to comply. Iran has demanded the *immediate* lifting of sanctions when the final agreement is signed. The White House also says that U.S. sanctions on Iran for terrorism, human rights abuses, and ballistic missiles are not part of the deal and will remain in place.

The timing and substance of sanctions relief has been and will continue to be hotly debated. A compromise will be needed that allows for substantive sanctions relief early in the process, as an inducement for Iranian cooperation, while the U.S. and its partners retain a capacity to reimpose sanctions if Iran violates the agreement. In successful nuclear nonproliferation agreements achieved in other cases—Libya, North Korea, Ukraine, and South Africa— incentives have been essential to achieving nonproliferation compliance. Sanctions can be effective in bringing parties to the bargaining table, but sanctions relief is necessary as an incentive to gain compliance with the resulting terms.

An overly aggressive policy of delaying sanctions relief and maintaining or

increasing sanctions pressure could undermine the agreement and strengthen the hand of hardline anti-Western political and military elements in Iran. If the international coalition collapses, the U.S. will be blamed and diplomatic options for preventing proliferation in Iran could collapse.

The framework does not resolve all the uncertainties of the Iranian nuclear program, but it goes further and imposes more far-reaching nuclear reductions than many experts anticipated or even thought possible. It enhances international security and reduces the nuclear threat to Israel. This deal is a big win for the United States and also will benefit Iran as it complies with the terms and re-engages with the international community. As Christian leaders said in their statement of support for the agreement: Hope, but verify. ■

David Cortright, a Sojourners contributing writer, is director of policy studies at Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. The Christian statement in support of the Iran Nuclear Framework Agreement is on page 12.

By Jeffrey D. Clements

People of God v. Citizens United

Corporations aren't made in the image of God—people are.

WHEN YOU GIVE a luncheon, Jesus says, don't invite your rich neighbors; instead invite the poor, the vulnerable, the outcast. I was reminded of Jesus' words recently when President Obama came to Boston. Local foodies celebrated his stop at a hip restaurant. However, only the "rich neighbors" were invited: Thirty guests who had paid up to \$33,400 each in political contributions were given the opportunity to lunch with the president.

Amazingly, a \$33,000 lunch is pocket change for those now entitled, thanks to Citizens United, to the ears of our politicians. In the 2012 election, one multibillionaire spent \$150 million to defeat Obama. Thirty-two super PAC donors, "giving an average of \$9.9 million each, matched the \$313 million that President Obama and Mitt Romney raised from all of their small

donors combined—that's at least 3.7 million people giving less than \$200," stated a 2013 report that examined Federal Elections Commission data.

In 2010, the Supreme Court concluded that corporations are "people" with First Amendment rights to free speech, opening the floodgates for unaccountable money to pour into state and federal elections. In essence, the Citizens United ruling put democracy up for sale. In the "marketplace" of political representation, almost all Americans are outbid and locked out.

Now millions of Americans are working for a constitutional amendment to overturn Citizens United—and they're gaining traction.

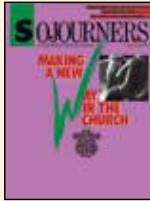
The Democracy for All amendment states: "Congress and the States may regulate and set reasonable limits on the raising and spending

From the Archives

July 1987

Sacramental Moments

[W]hen I was in junior high, I decided I wanted to become the first black woman ordained in the Lutheran Church. ...



At Wesley I enjoyed being a student again, until one of the black seminarians asked, "How can you be black and be Lutheran?" I didn't know. I had never thought about it. The Lutheran Church is predominantly white, ethnically German and Scandinavian. It is highly structured and without the display of lively emotions most blacks are used to in their religious experiences. The Lutheran Church was the only church I had ever really known, and yet suddenly I was thrust into an identity crisis that really rocked me. ...

I am still learning who this black woman pastor is. I am still learning how to use who I am as a black person and as a woman to provide a strong witness for the church. I have no doubts that being black and a woman are important and integral to who I am, and yet for me those factors are not the issue in ministry.

The issue is sharing together the sacramental moments of our lives, the times when heaven and earth touch—holy communion, baptism, worship, touching people, and being touched by them when we celebrate joys and huddle together in pain. The issue is that we share a relationship with God and with each other, and it takes many talents and a variety of people to populate our church. ■

Laura Griffin was the second black woman to be ordained in the American Lutheran Church.

of money by candidates and others to influence elections." The amendment allows for reasonable limits on campaign spending and other overdue reforms, including reinstating the restrictions on corporate election spending that were struck down under Citizens United. Currently, it has 39 co-sponsors in the Senate and 126 co-sponsors in the House.

All Americans have a stake in this struggle, but when human dignity and equality are jeopardized, people of faith must lead. Last year, 18 national faith organizations urged Congress to advance a campaign-finance-reform amendment. Methodists, Presbyterians, Muslims, Quakers, Mennonites, members of the Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, and several Catholic organizations and religious orders are demanding that "a democratic country should actually adhere to democratic practices." As Jim Wallis, editor-in-chief of *Sojourners*, put it, "There certainly isn't, and never will be, a super PAC for the poor."

Other religious groups are offering resources as well. Auburn Theological Seminary's report *Lo\$ing Faith in Our Democracy* is a multifaith deep-dive into the theological underpinnings for challenging the radically unequal role of money in politics. The Franciscan Action Network launched Faithful Democracy, a campaign to examine the influence of PAC money on issues such as private prisons, climate change, gun-violence prevention, and immigration.

Local and state initiatives to overturn Citizens United are also building momentum. In Montana, for example, voters charged their congressional delegation to ensure "a level playing field in campaign spending." More than 20 faith leaders rallied support for the ballot initiative. "People, not corporations and special interests, are made in the image of God," wrote Lutheran Bishop Jessica Crist. "This is a faith issue. ... This is not a partisan issue, [but] a justice issue." Montana voters passed the constitutional amendment ballot initiative by a margin of 3 to 1.

In just five years, vibrant leadership from faith communities has shifted the constitutional amendment movement from a pipe dream to the mainstream. Sixteen states and 660 communities have enacted amendment resolutions, often by overwhelming

cross-partisan margins. Now the movement is entering the presidential race: Both Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Lindsey Graham are calling for an amendment to overturn Citizens United.

Meaningful checks and balances must be re-established to clean up the corruption in our political system and to shape corporations in ways that better serve our democracy. A constitutional amendment could overturn the excesses unleashed by Citizens United and help lead to a more-representative democracy. When we do that, all will be welcome at the celebration luncheon. ■

Jeffrey D. Clements is cofounder of Free Speech for People (freespeechforpeople.org) and the author of Corporations Are Not People: Reclaiming Democracy from Big Money and Global Corporations.

By Elizabeth D. Rios

Latino Evangelicals Say No to the Death Penalty

Being pro-life means opposing capital punishment.

THE NATIONAL LATINO Evangelical Coalition announced in March that it would no longer support the death penalty, making it the first U.S. evangelical association to take this stand. Coalition president Gabriel Salguero announced the change at a press conference in Orlando, Fla., and urged NaLEC's 3,000 member congregations to work toward ending capital punishment nationwide.

"As Christ-followers, we are called to work toward justice for all. And as Latinos, we know too well that justice is not always even-handed," said Salguero.

This groundbreaking move by Latino evangelicals puts them at odds with the pro-death penalty stance of the National Association of Evangelicals, although "sources within the NAE say that leadership is considering a change in the months ahead," according to Religion News Service.

NaLEC did not come to this new

position lightly. It came after two years of prayer and reflection accompanied by intensive dialogue between NaLEC's leadership and Equal Justice USA and the Constitution Project, two leading anti-death penalty organizations. In addition, coalition members met with a number of wrongly convicted former prisoners such as Fernando Bermudez, who spent 18 years in prison in New York for a murder he did not commit.

According to Salguero, selecting Florida for the announcement was intentional. Florida was the first state to reintroduce capital punishment after the Supreme Court struck down the 1972 moratorium. Since executions were resumed, 25 people on Florida's death row have been exonerated. This record of mistaken convictions is the highest of any state. It is particularly disturbing that Florida has on its books the so-called Timely Justice Act that mandates a swift execution process. With 394 people currently on Florida's death row and the prevalence of mishandled cases and inadequate defense, especially for minorities, this law exacerbates existing problems in a system plagued by errors.

"Human beings are fallible," said Salguero, "and there is no room for fallibility in matters of life and death."

Justice is only truly justice when there is a level playing field—but the field is not level for people of color or those who are poor. There have been 153 exonerations due to wrongful convictions in the U.S. since 1973. Racial bias slants the system, accounting for more convictions and death penalty sentences than the system would care to admit.

Former Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan Jr. put it this way: "Perhaps the bleakest fact of all is that the death penalty is imposed not only in a freakish and discriminatory manner, but also in some cases upon defendants who are actually innocent."

The National Latino Evangelical Coalition has called on all evangelicals to take a stand against the death penalty. "We are pro-life," Salguero said. "We have a womb-to-tomb theology." It's time to end this abuse of government power instead of standing idly by and tolerating it. ■

Elizabeth D. Rios (www.lizrios.com) is co-pastor of Passion Christian Church in Hollywood, Fla., and serves on the board of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition.



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A RACE & POVERTY INITIATIVE FROM **sojourners**

HOPE, BUT VERIFY

Christian leaders support the Iran Framework Agreement

As Christian leaders in the United States, we welcome and support the Framework Agreement, announced by seven nations on April 2, to dramatically restrain the capacity of Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. We believe this diplomatic path and process should be ardently pursued and given a chance to succeed.

We do so not as politicians but as those whose deep faith commitments compel us to speak clearly, with moral and practical wisdom, about any possibility that restrains the threat of war and opens pathways toward peace. Indeed, the One whose words and life we follow said “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Mathew 5:9).

As followers of Christ, we begin with the things that Jesus instructed us to do. Whenever Christians are responding to situations of conflict, to issues of war and peace, Jesus must always be our starting point. On matters of both personal relationships and public policy, we must start with the question, “What can we best do to make peace?”

At the same time, our biblical faith tradition also cautions us about the persistent potential of evil. We are aware of this when we view the conflicts between nations and peoples—which are the inevitable result of human sin in a fallen world. For this reason Jesus said, “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves”; he admonished his followers to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Mathew 10:16).

Thus we are careful to trust not in words alone, but in actions that are fully transparent. The Framework Agreement, with its unprecedented provisions for verification, relies more on transparency than trust and offers the best path to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear-armed state.

It is the sacred responsibility of all those entrusted with political power to pursue, with patient perseverance, every option

that makes the destruction of war less possible, in order to protect human life and dignity. This becomes an even more urgent moral and spiritual imperative when we have the chance to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons, with their terrifying potential of mass destruction.

We are encouraged by the ways this agreement limits Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, capacities, and materials—more than some of us had expected or even hoped. But the greatest attraction for us is the unprecedented and highly transparent monitoring and inspections systems that have been agreed to in principle and now must be finalized by June 30.

This path is better than the alternatives. Increasing sanctions, as some have proposed, is impossible without multinational support. And to engage in military strikes would be, at best, premature, as well as highly unpredictable and morally irresponsible in creating yet another U.S. war with a Muslim country.

As Christians we have a moral obligation to pursue this diplomatic course of difficult negotiations until that course is shown to be impossible. Diplomacy is never perfect, but the framework for a nuclear agreement announced April 2 is the best path to achieve the goal of preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear-armed state. When finalized, the parameters of this deal will make it more difficult for Iran to develop a weapon—a goal that reflects the binding commitments made by 191 U.N. member states, including the United States, under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

As Christian leaders we are telling our political leaders: It is imperative that you pursue this agreement with integrity, commitment, and perseverance. We will be praying for you. We agree with our brother Pope Francis who said in his Easter Mass: “In hope we entrust to the merciful Lord the framework recently agreed to in Lausanne, that it may be a definitive step toward a more secure and fraternal world.” ■

SIGNED BY: Paul Alexander, President, Evangelicals for Social Action; Dr. Carroll A. Baltimore Sr., President/CEO, Global Alliance Interfaith Networks; Rev. Leroy Barber, Global Executive Director, Word Made Flesh; Rev. Geoffrey Black, General Minister and President, United Church of Christ; Diana Butler Bass, Ph.D., Author and Independent Scholar; J. Ron Byler, Executive Director, Mennonite Central Committee U.S.; Sister Simone Campbell, SSS, Executive Director, NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby; Tony Campolo, Founder, Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education; Sr. Patricia Chappell, Executive Director, Pax Christi USA; Shane Claiborne, Executive Director, Red Letter Christians; Rev. Dr. Thomas R. De Vries, General Secretary, Reformed Church in America; Marie Dennis, Co-President, Pax Christi International; Joshua DuBois, CEO, Values Partnerships; Adam Estle, Executive Director, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding; Glen Gersmehl, National Coordinator, Lutheran Peace Fellowship; Wes Granberg-Michaelson, General Secretary Emeritus, Reformed Church in America; Very Rev. Jim Greenfield, President, Conference of Major Superiors of Men; David Gushee, Director, Center for Theology and Public Life, Mercer University; Cynthia L. Hale, Senior Pastor, Ray of Hope Christian Church; John P. Hartley, Executive Director, Pathways for Mutual Respect; Joel Hunter, Senior Pastor, Northland, A Church Distributed; Hyepin Im, Founder and President, Korean Churches for Community Development; Rick Love, President, Peace Catalyst International; Rev. Carlos L. Malave, Executive Director, Christian Churches Together; Rev. John L. McCullough, President and CEO, Church World Service; Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie, African Methodist Episcopal Church; Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley, General Secretary, American Baptist Churches USA; Otis Moss III, Pastor, Trinity United Church of Christ; David Neff, Editor-in-Chief (retired), Christianity Today; Rev. Stanley J. Noffsinger, General Secretary, Church of the Brethren; Suzii Paynter, Executive Coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; LeDayne McLeese Polaski, Executive Director, BPFNA (Bautistas por la Paz); Soong Chan-Rah, Milton B. Engebretson Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism, North Park Theological Seminary; Rev. Gabriel Salguero, President, National Latino Evangelical Coalition; Colin Saxton, General Secretary, Friends United Meeting; Stephen Schneck, Director, Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies, The Catholic University of America; Ronald J. Sider, President Emeritus, Evangelicals for Social Action; Rev. Kristin Stoneking, Executive Director, Fellowship of Reconciliation; Ervin R. Stutzman, Executive Director, Mennonite Church USA; Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, United Methodist Church; Jer Swigart & Jon Huckins, Co-Founding Directors, The Global Immersion Project; Dr. Geoff Tunnicliffe, Chairman, Christian Media Corp Int.; Jim Wallis, President and Founder, and Lisa Sharon Harper, Chief Church Engagement Officer, Sojourners; Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins, General Minister and President, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, Founder, Two Futures Project; Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, Co-Chair, National African American Clergy Network. Organizations listed for identification purposes only.

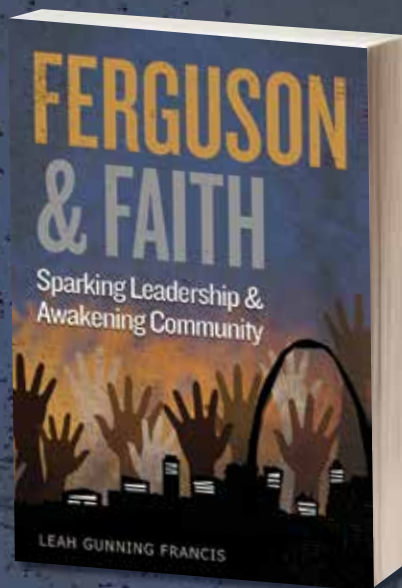
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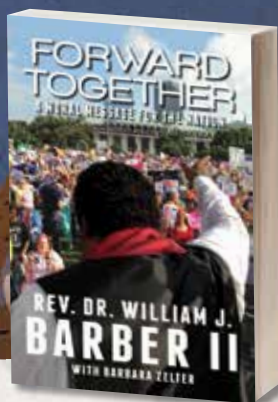


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Almost half of the homes in Bangladesh do not have electricity, but solar power is filling the void.

thethirdpole.net

Empowering the World

ONE OF THE most destabilizing facts of the last five years is this: The price of a solar panel has fallen 75 percent. The engineers have done their job, and that offers many possibilities.

We usually look at what the developed countries are doing with renewable energy, such as the fact that there were days during summer 2014 when Germany was gener-

As many as 80,000 new connections a month, which is far more than in the United States. Fifteen million Bangladeshis live in solar-powered houses already, and the government is hoping to have the entire nation hooked up by 2020.

That means that kids can study at night. It also means that families don't have to waste as much as 30 percent of their income on kerosene. It also means that they don't have to breathe those kerosene fumes, and that the black soot the lamps throw off won't be melting glaciers. It also means that everyone can charge their cell phones, which are ubiquitous in Bangladesh. In fact, places like Bangladesh leapfrogged the whole telephone pole thing and went straight to mobile; now they're leapfrogging coal and gas and going straight to solar.

It's happening other places too, on scales large and small. In India, entrepreneurs are selling panels, batteries, and bulbs on an installment plan, with payments lower than they were for the kerosene the solar replaces; their technicians fan out on bikes to instantly fix any technical troubles. In Nepal, hammered by a horrible earthquake, the

only working lights in much of the country were powered by the sun, and the local Red Cross had had the great foresight a year earlier to inaugurate a solar-powered blood bank.

This could happen across the world, and in very short order. It's so much cheaper and easier to set up solar panels than it is to run wires and poles—and since those wires and poles connect back to polluting central power plants, the benefits of replacing that system are obvious. One in six Indian deaths is related to air pollution, and crop yields are dramatically depressed by the hazy miasma that hovers over the country. Solar is a great liberator for the very poor, but also for everyone who has to, you know, breathe.

The climate conference in Paris this December could make sure there is financing from the rich countries to spread this new solar blessing to every corner of the earth in very short order. Ten years ago, that would have cost too much; now it would cost far too much not to. ■



Bill McKibben is the Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College in Vermont and founder of 350.org.

Fifteen million Bangladeshis already live in solar-powered houses.

ating three quarters of its power from solar panels (Germany!). But the most amazing miracles—and it doesn't really stretch the word "miracle"—are happening in the poorest places, where for the very first time lights are blazing on.

Take rural Bangladesh, where fossil fuel has barely penetrated in the 200 years of its ascendancy in the West. There's no grid—at night it just goes dark. Until the last few years, when low-cost solar panels and innovative financing arranged by groups such as the Grameen Bank have allowed the very rapid spread of solar panels. How rapid?



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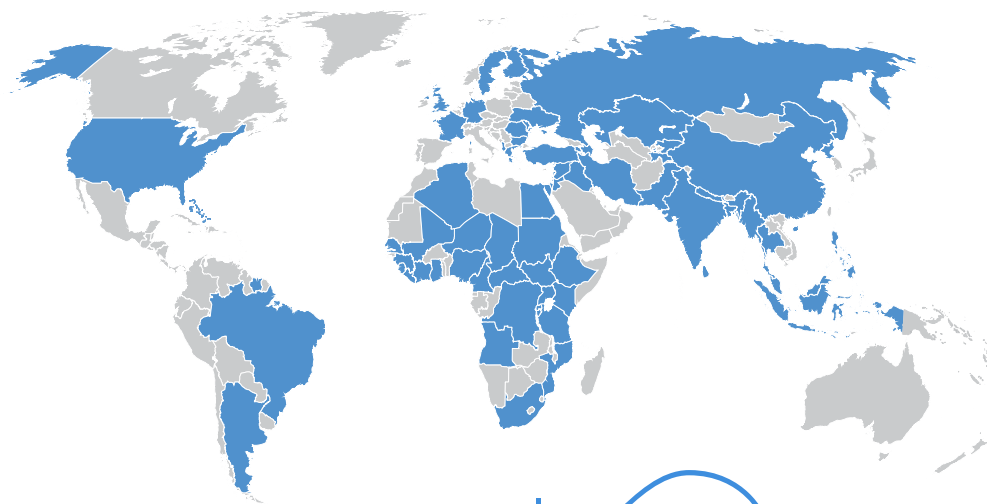
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hope and relief for the persecuted church

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Last year, Barnabas Aid gave \$3,070,058.77 to support Syrian Christians in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Armenia, and provided emergency relief to over 30,000 Iraqi Christians. But our work relies on donations from supporters;

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Disaster relief



Barnabas has supplied beds, pillows and blankets to displaced Christians living in church halls and temporary housing

Rita's Story

"Thank you Lord, because from nowhere and from this empty kitchen now I can buy some food. How generous you are, O Lord!" "Rita" was overcome when a volunteer working for one of our partner organizations went to deliver aid to her home. The volunteer told us, "She recognized me when she opened the door and immediately the tears fell from her eyes and she started crying loudly! Insisting I come into her home, she led me to the very humble kitchen where the shelves and refrigerator were empty except for a pack of bread! With tears falling down her face, she started thanking God for all those who made this possible and for providing money for her family and so many others. I heard her say in a faint voice, 'I can buy food, my eye drops and the bottle of cooking gas!'"

Michael and Ayda's Story

After their neighborhood in Homs was attacked, "Michael" and his wife, "Ayda", and their twelve-year-old twin boys, "Suleiman" and "Salim", left their home with just a small bag of clothes. A friend allowed them to stay in his spare parts store, so the family lived in the tiny room with no toilet or kitchen, sleeping on the ground next to the spare parts, with only their coats to cover them. Michael, who had worked in a maintenance workshop, looked desperately for a job but without success. Often the family had only old bread to eat. When a Barnabas partner organization visited the family and offered them support to rent a room and buy some food, Michael sat speechless, Ayda cried and the twins danced for joy.

Edeil's Story

"My husband used to have a small factory that made building blocks," says "Edeil". "I was a teacher at one of the schools. One day, the rebels shot my husband and killed him with 36 bullets. Then the rebels took his body and started videoing it, saying that the Syrian army had killed him. When we asked for the body, they demanded a ransom of 90,000 Syrian Pounds (\$483) for the body." After she and her son Fadi escaped, Edeil was able to rent a house near the church where Barnabas is supporting them.

Supporting Syrian Christians in Crisis, Bringing hope to Christians in Iraq.

Hope & Aid



12.2
million people in
Syria are in need



500,000
Syrian Christians have fled
the country, nearly a quarter
of the country's total Christian
population before the conflict



7.6
million people are
internally displaced



3.8
million Syrians have
fled the country

Shelter and support for Syrian believers

Barnabas Aid is providing shelter, aid and support to Syrian believers who are living in the midst of violence, hunger and homelessness. With the conflict in Syria now in its fifth year, hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrian Christians are bracing themselves for yet another year far from their homes and with no prospect of being able to return. Although there have been Christians in Syria for nearly 2,000 years, the country's Christian presence is now under serious threat as the Christian population diminishes year after year in response to the current conflict.

Bringing hope to Christians in Iraq

After Islamic State (IS) militants seized the Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014, thousands of people fled to various parts of northern Iraq. Christians were given three options and three days to make up their mind: convert to Islam, pay an extortionate head tax, or leave. Otherwise they would be killed. This tax, known as jizya, is found in traditional Islamic law and grants protection to Christian and Jewish minorities living under Islamic rule, emphasizing their inferior status in comparison to Muslim citizens.



"So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." —Galatians 6:10 NIV

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Many Southern Christians have not rejected the theological defense system that their forebears set up to maintain segregation.

IF YOU'RE A Christian who cares about social justice, you can't afford to ignore Texas.

In his book *Rough Country*, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow puts it bluntly: "Texas is America's most powerful Bible-Belt state." Texas has the second largest population in the country, home to more than 26 million people. In 2014, Texans led six out of 21 congressional committees. And more than half of Texans attend church at least twice monthly.

No other state has more evangelical Christians than Texas. Many national Christian media companies, parachurch ministries, and influential megachurches are based in Texas. That's why Texas is called the Buckle of the Bible Belt: It's the most populous, wealthy, and politically powerful part of the country where evangelical churchgoing is still a dominant force.

But what if we reimagine the Bible Belt? In 2005, Texas officially became a "majority-minority" state, where traditional minority racial or ethnic groups represent more than half of the population. A majority of Texans under 40 in the pews are people of color. This creates an opportunity: Demographic change could lead to cultural change. What if we cast a new vision for faith in Texas public life that puts working families and people of color at the center?

But demographic change will not translate automatically into cultural change. The dominant historical Bible Belt narrative has influenced and shaped the identities of all Texas Christians, including

in the African-American and Latino faith communities.

Christians and white supremacy

In Texas and most of the South, the dominant form of evangelical Christianity has been deeply complicit with white supremacy. During the ascendancy of the Ku Klux Klan, many white Christians acted as if lynching was a legitimate defense of their white Christian civilization. In the 1920s, J. Frank Norris, pastor of a 10,000-member fundamentalist megachurch in Fort Worth, kept close ties with the Klan, according to author David R. Stokes. Norris, a powerful fundamentalist leader, even invited the Texas Klan's Grand Dragon to lead prayer from the church's pulpit one Sunday morning and later hired him to teach at the church.

In the 1950s and '60s, the most powerful leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention—including W.A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, the nation's largest Southern Baptist church at the time—opposed the civil rights movement. In 1956, Criswell denounced the Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that ruled racial segregation unconstitutional. "Let them integrate," Criswell shouted before the South Carolina legislature, according to historian Andrew M. Manis. "Let them sit up there in their dirty shirts and make all their fine speeches. But they are all a bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up."

To reconcile racial apartheid with the Christian faith, white segregationists developed a theological defense system. If Christianity was about saving individual

souls, they argued, then worrying about earthly injustice was an unspiritual distraction from the "gospel." If individual sin was the only thing that mattered, then white Christians needed only to live upright personal lives—even within a racial apartheid system. Pro-segregation Christians viewed the idea of systemic sin as unbiblical—or worse yet, as godless communism.

This theological defense system allowed white Christians to reject the prophetic message of Christian leaders such as Martin Luther King and Fannie Lou Hamer. It was also used to marginalize the civil rights movement's white allies who were *within* the evangelical tradition. Even after conservative white evangelicals accommodated to racial integration, they kept this theological defense system in place: Racism, they said, was only a problem of individual sin, not systemic sin. People who said differently were just "infidels, dying from the neck up."

This dominant white evangelical tradition has clashed with a prophetic, social justice perspective in a series of historical struggles, including slavery, post-Civil War reconstruction, and the ongoing civil rights movement. During chattel enslavement in America, Africans and their descendants had to creatively construct an alternative theology that affirmed their own humanity, rejected the slave owner's theology, and called for justice. Out of the "brush harbors," where the enslaved would escape to worship the God they knew away from the watchful eye of the slave owner, an alternative theology emerged. This was the foundation for the prophetic tradition of the African-American

ReIMAGINING THE BIBLE BELT

Faith-based organizing in the Lone Star State is taking on a new hue.

by **DANIELLE AYERS** and **LYDIA BEAN**

church, a church rooted in a God who cared about both their body and their soul.

This prophetic theology recognizes sin at both the individual and systemic levels. African-American Christians have long known what it means to have one's humanity stripped away by unjust systems, whether as enslaved persons or disenfranchised citizens under Jim Crow segregation. This theology demands that Christians dismantle systemic injustice that subjugates people. Any theology that justifies violence, enslavement, and oppression—that dehumanizes the *Imago Dei* (the image of God)—is idolatrous, not the work of the Creator. Theologian and mystic Howard Thurman wrote, “To speak of the love for humanity is meaningless. There is no such thing as humanity. What we call humanity has a name, was born, lives on a street, gets hungry, needs all the particular things we need. As an abstract, it has no reality whatsoever.”



The Accommodation

As Christian leaders based in Dallas, we know that most Southern Christians now reject the idea that racial segregation is God's design. But many Southern Christians have not rejected the theological defense system that their forebears set up to maintain segregation and dismiss prophetic voices in the church.

In spring 2014, we launched Faith in Texas, a multiracial movement composed of

African-American, Latino, and Anglo congregations in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, as an affiliate of PICO, a faith-based community organizing network with groups in more than 20 states. Our goal is to develop more than 10,000 new civic leaders from all ethnic and racial groups, all walks of life, and all income levels in the next decade, to keep pace with Texas' growing population. Our first challenge, however, was to create a group culture where diverse faith leaders could talk openly about economic and racial justice.

On the rare occasions that African-American, Latino, and Anglo faith leaders gathered at the same table in Dallas, it was generally assumed that the white leaders owned the table; the unspoken norm was that African American, Latino, and faith leaders from low-income communities must never talk about how systemic sin was hurting their flock.

These “norms” are partly a result of Dallas' unique history. Our city never had a civil rights movement the way that Atlanta or Montgomery, Ala., did. Instead, during the 1960s a closed circle of white Dallas elites cut a deal with African-American pastors: The white leaders would tamp down their anti-African-American terrorism and move slowly toward integration, if African-American leaders would renounce sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and other powerful public tactics. Prominent African-American pastors accepted the deal, thus creating a regime that former *Dallas Morning News* columnist Jim Schutze calls “The Accommodation” (in his book by the same name). As a result, Dallas

faith leaders never learned how to negotiate openly about racial inequality or systemic injustice.



Breaking dysfunctional patterns

Before our movement could leap into action, we had to break these dysfunctional patterns. More than a year was spent meeting with diverse leaders in one-on-one and small group settings. In the one-on-one settings, Latino evangelical pastors often shared painful experiences about undocumented people in their church who were trapped within a broken immigration system. But they rarely shared these stories with white evangelical pastors because they only encountered anger or avoidance. One Latino Pentecostal pastor described these anti-immigrant reactions as “demonic possession” and said it was jarring to hear them coming from godly people.

To break down these dysfunctional patterns, a diverse vision team was established to engage in risky conversations in a larger group setting. One turning point was when a young Latina Catholic leader revealed that she was undocumented. For her, the word “illegal” was dehumanizing, analogous to the n-word. She anticipated a negative reaction; instead she was warmly embraced by both African-American and Anglo pastors. Another turning point came when a white evangelical pastor publicly apologized to immigrant pastors for failing to walk

Dallas never had
a civil rights movement
in the way that Atlanta or
Montgomery did.

alongside them in the struggle for immigration reform. These first steps started us on a path of talking openly about racial and economic inequality—and casting a truly multiracial faith vision for Texas.

When we publicly launched Faith in Texas in 2014, we were overwhelmed by the diversity of people who responded: young Latino Catholics, middle-aged Anglo evangelicals, African-American Protestants, United Methodists, Muslim civic leaders, blue-collar workers, folks with a thick Texas twang, and folks who moved here from the Northeast.

Often people assume that social justice voices are marginal in Texas because Texans don't care. More often, we find that Texans have never been asked. Our first training took place in the middle of an ice storm that shut down schools and workplaces all over the region. Texas cities have few snow plows, so Texans usually respond to winter weather by hunkering down until it melts. More than 100 people came anyway, driving 10 miles per hour over solid ice to get to the training.

Here's an example of putting the kind of faith-based organizing we're describing into practice. In 2010, an auto title loan business opened near Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas. The church's senior pastor, Frederick D. Haynes III, was alarmed at the proliferation of predatory lenders popping up in the community. The Bible Belt, especially Texas, leads the nation in predatory lenders. With as much as the Bible says about usury, it's surprising that legalized loan sharks are able to operate so freely

in such a strong evangelical culture.

Friendship-West Baptist decided to take action. First, the church joined city- and statewide coalitions to advocate for regulations against predatory lending. These efforts were successful in passing both lending and zoning ordinances—and resulted in a 27 percent drop in the number of payday lenders in Dallas. We are also fighting predatory lending at the state level, where we are pushing to close legal loopholes that allow Texans to get caught in a debt trap.

Another way to address the issue locally is to create an alternative to the predatory lending industry. Under the leadership of Haynes, Friendship-West acquired St. John's Credit Union, a historic African-American-owned credit union, and relaunched it as the Faith Cooperative Federal Credit Union. Operated separately from the church, the financial institution offers small-dollar loans to counter predatory lenders and economically empower its members.



Building power from the margins

There are certainly unique challenges to organizing faith communities in our context. For example, leading as a woman is more difficult in our context, because many powerful churches in Texas still oppose having women in ministry. But we've also discovered that Texas has some unique strengths. In the words of Flannery O'Connor, "[W]hile the South is hardly

Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted." We are not naive about the failures of Texas organized religion. And yet our state is full of people who earnestly seek to follow Jesus. We dare to re-imagine the Bible Belt, because God is faithful.

These basic principles of multifaith, multiethnic organizing can be applied far beyond Texas and the South. Start by getting real about the sinful religious history of your context. Lift up the forgotten stories of faithfulness that were left out of the dominant narrative. Create new tables to practice conversations that bridge lines of race, class, religion, and gender. Forge a new public theology that affirms the humanity of all people. Raise up a new generation of faith leaders to build power from the margins.

In the words of Jesus, we find that "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matthew 9:37-38). Confronted by the deep dysfunction of Texas politics, we are moved to pray to God to send more laborers into the harvest. Then the Bible Belt can be known as a place where people honestly search the scriptures to pursue God's justice on earth as it is in heaven—and perhaps history can be redeemed. ■

Danielle Ayers, co-author of To Serve This Present Age: Social Justice Ministries in the Black Church, is the minister of justice at Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas. Lydia Bean, author of The Politics of Evangelical Identity, is lead organizer for Faith in Texas (FaithinTX.org), a multiracial movement for social justice affiliated with the PICO National Network.

In 2005, Texas officially became a "majority-minority" state. But demographic change will not translate automatically into cultural change.





A Miracle of Resilience

The story of black families in America is a testament to persistence, determination, and hope.

by LISA SHARON HARPER

MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER, Elizabeth “Lizzie” Johnson, was born in 1890 in Camden, S.C., with a different last name from all the other people in her household. Three generations later, we have no idea where the name Johnson came from.

Lizzie grew up working plantation land owned by her grandmother, Lea Ballard. Lea received the land in the wake of the Civil War: We don’t know how or why, though one theory speculates that Lea, who was listed as a 42-year-old mulatto widow on the 1880 U.S. Census, may have been the daughter of her slave owner. He may have given the land to her after the Civil War. We don’t know. We only know that Lea owned it, and that had 17 children who worked that land, according to family lore, and that the city of Camden eventually stole the land from her by the power of eminent domain. This we know from records I hold in my possession.

Lizzie married a railroad man named Charles Jenkins. Lizzie and Charles had three children; Charles later died in a railroad accident. Lizzie had a choice: endure the brutality of the Jim Crow South

The gale-force winds of history have hewn the black family in America.

alone with three kids, or move with the stream of black bodies migrating north. Lizzie migrated to Washington, D.C., and, eventually, to Philadelphia and took her lightest-skinned child with her.

Both mother and child were light enough to pass for white. My caramel-toned, straight-haired grandmother, Willa, and her brother, Charlie, were too dark. So they were left behind in the care of their elderly great-grandmother. Willa and Charlie joined others on the plantation and earned their keep working the fields.

Lizzie eventually sent for Willa and Charlie, calling them north to Philadelphia after her white cover had been blown. She fell in love and married a dark-skinned man and settled in the southern part of Philadelphia, in a neighborhood directly adjacent to another set of recent Philadelphia immigrants: Italians.

This is my family, one branch of the tree. My family’s patterns, textures, tragedies, and triumphs have been shaped on a fundamental level

Stereo Culture Society



Family photos

by the soil from which it sprang—slavery—and by the water and drought it endured in the searing sun of Jim Crow oppression. Our intergenerational strengths, insanities, and brokenness, our view of land and money, and our very view of family itself has been fed and shaped by the soils of our history.

A history of separation

My family is not unique. The shared history of black folk in the United States bequeaths common language, mores, strengths, and difficulties forged in the furnace of oppression.

What is the psychological impact of generations of family separation, first through forced tearing apart of families in the industrial complex of human bondage, then through migratory partings catalyzed by Jim Crow, and finally the severances caused by the unrelenting drumbeat of mass incarceration and early death on U.S. soil?

What is the psychological, social, and economic impact on families of 15 generations of hard labor with no pay, release from captivity, re-enslavement through Jim Crow, and peonage for another five generations, then release from Jim Crow, then re-enslavement again through mass incarceration for another two generations?

And what is the impact on families when this history is the low-level hum behind all of the events of human relating: making friends in grade school; relating to healthy, alcoholic, or single parents; having loyal or abusive siblings, nurturing aunts, distant uncles, or doting grandparents; falling in love, getting married, and having babies; employment or job loss and even illness and death—what is the impact when the whole shebang we call life is carried out in the context of this history?

This is the burden of black families in the United States.

A 2012 Census Bureau study pointed out that “Black men and women were married in greater proportions than white men

and women until 1960 for men and 1970 for women.” The study identified cultural components—such as the prevalence of female-led homes, current-day low marriage rates, and the long history of the presence of extended family in the home—as key factors in black family formation. “Structural components,” the study noted, “are more influential than cultural components in determining race differences among never married individuals.”

The study highlights the deep impact of structural factors such as mass incarceration and drug policy. “Social inequality in imprisonment,” the study pointed out, “is becoming so extensive that incarceration is becoming a normative life course stage among low-educated, black men.” The study adds: “The absence of young black men in the household population as a consequence of such policies might be observable in differential marriage patterns by race over the last century.”

‘A family is like a bicycle ...’

Dr. Claudia Owens Shields, chair of clinical psychology at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, specializes in the impact of psychosocial and environmental stressors on individuals. In a recent interview Shields explained to me the impact of the structural and systemic stressors on black individuals and families.

“Psychosocial stressors are caused by relationships and larger social structures,” Shields explained. “A perfect example would be every time you turn on the news and see an African-American male being shot by police—that’s a psychosocial stressor, because it’s interpersonal and it happens in society.”

Shields explained further: “General family systems theory says that anytime one individual in the family is affected by something, it sends a ripple through the whole family. A family is like a bicycle. If you take

the chain off that bike, you can pedal all you want, but that bike isn’t going anywhere ... because that bicycle functions as a system. A family functions in the same way. Most people in families have a particular role ... if you lose a family member, you have no one to fill that role.”

Systemic racism has a huge impact on families. Shields said that many years ago, a young man who had just lost his mother came to see her for psychotherapy, requesting help with the grieving process. “But one of the things he also wanted to talk about,” Shields said, “was the way police and other students were treating him on that college campus. For instance, he could be sitting in the lounge in his dorm, watching television. And people would call the police saying, ‘There’s this black guy in our dorm.’ With little other information, the police would come and question the young man, Shields said.

“What’s interesting to me,” Shields continued, “is that he came to talk to me about the loss of his mother, a family issue. But one of the things that came up was how unsafe and out of place he felt on campus.” There are layers to that black student’s grief experience that would not be present for one who just had to deal with the grief. Structural and systemic issues added complicating factors to the young man’s grieving process.

Shields offered another example, about an actual person: “Someone can say to me ‘I’ve had 25 job interviews and no one will hire me. What’s wrong with me? Maybe I need to redo my resume. Maybe I need a different suit. I’ve got a master’s degree. I’ve got all this experience and no one will hire me.’ At some point, you ask, ‘What’s wrong with me that I can’t get hired?’”

Shields said, “Of course, you have to ask that. And for people with race, gender, sexual orientation privilege, the story ends with: ‘I just have to step up my game.’ In the context of systemic racism, which privileges some and denies access to others, that

Photos of the author's family, from left: Lea Ballard (circa 1900), the last adult slave in the family; the author's grandparents, Willa Jenkins and Junius Lawrence (circa 1930); Lawrence with the author's mother, Sharon, and uncle, Richie.

isn't the whole picture. There is this other piece that may also be working against him. The person might give up and become discouraged. They might start to experience feelings of low self-efficacy. Now the person is at higher risk for anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. And they enter a downward spiral."

In 2003 the National Institutes of Health published a study titled *Racial/Ethnic Differences in Rates of Depression among Preretirement Adults*. The study concluded: "Major depression and factors associated with depression are more prevalent in minority populations than whites." The NIH research indicated that "the presence of fewer economic resources—less education, income, or wealth; lack of private health insurance coverage or employment—was associated with a greater frequency of depression."

A taller mountain to climb

Now consider the impact of mass incarceration on black families.

There are 1.5 million black men and boys missing from black communities across the United States, according to an April 2015 nytimes.com analysis titled "1.5 Million Missing Black Men." They are "missing" due to the racialized impacts of mass incarceration and early deaths in black communities, according to the article.

"The disappearance of these men has far-reaching implications," the article said. "Their absence disrupts family formation, leading both to lower marriage rates and higher rates of childbirth outside marriage."

"The imbalance," the article continued, "has also forced women to rely on themselves—often alone—to support a household. In those states hit hardest by the high incarceration rates, African-American women have become more likely to work and more likely to pursue their education further than they are elsewhere."

"As a psychologist," Shields explained, "my job is to help people to identify the social structures that are working against you. If we can say to a person: 'The mountain you have to climb is a taller mountain. You're a good climber. Don't stop. You can do it. Let's get you an extra pair of hiking

boots (chuckles). Your experience may be different than other people around you.' Then the person stays encouraged and is more likely to stay engaged."

Beyond the stereotypes

Today's stereotypes of the black family highlight single mothers, unemployed or absent fathers, at-risk youth, and domineering matriarchs who spew spiritual wisdom and threaten "whuppings" just as fast. But these are hard-drawn, inhuman caricatures, not real humanity.

The gale-force winds of history have hewn the shapes of the black family, a fact

"The fact that the black family has survived for 400 years says a lot about us."

—Dr. Claudia Owens Shields



that too often is ignored.

Rather, many decry the results of that history—from marriage rates to poverty statistics—and assume that black people must simply be less capable of healthy family life.

Such a conclusion is only possible when black families are lifted out of their lived experience and placed instead in a petri dish for examination. Removed from the historical context—ignoring centuries of legal, social, and economic exclusion—we seem to be a hot mess. But place us back in the context of history, with eyes wide open to the seemingly insurmountable barriers we have had to overcome, and—remarkably—we become the clearest case for the

existence of the divine on earth: The black family as an institution is a miracle.

"I had a student compare how well white families have done in comparison to black families," Shields said to me.

"Okay. Say I have two trees in my backyard. They were planted at the exact same time. They received the same sun. The seedlings grew up to be the same size, same height.

"And I have one person who's responsible for cutting one down and another person who's responsible for cutting the other one down. One person gets an ax, the other gets a butter knife. The person with the ax cuts the tree down in about a day. The person

with the butter knife, about three years later they got the tree down. Who is the better chopper?"

"One of the things you ask," Shields explained, "is 'How does the family cope? What are the strengths?' Spirituality is huge for us. The fact that the black family has survived for 400 years says a lot about us. I think it speaks to our resilience.

"The question shouldn't be 'How come there are still so many black men in jail?' The question should be: 'How come there are still so many black men?' How did they manage to stay alive at all?"

I look back on my own family—the impacts of generations of slavery and rape, migration and family separation, colorism, economic struggle, red-lining in housing and employment, multiple wars, drug and alcohol addiction—and I marvel: If families are like bicycles, then how is our family still here? And how are other black families still here? We all went through it. And some were forced to cope with even more systemic and structural intrusion than ours. How has the black family survived at all?

I am reminded of the Bible handed down to me by my Grandmother Willa. Written in perfect cursive are the names of my great-grandparents and the date of their marriage, etched into a special page placed at the heart of the sacred book.

That's how we did it. ■

Lisa Sharon Harper is chief church engagement officer for Sojourners and co-author of *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith*.

File photo



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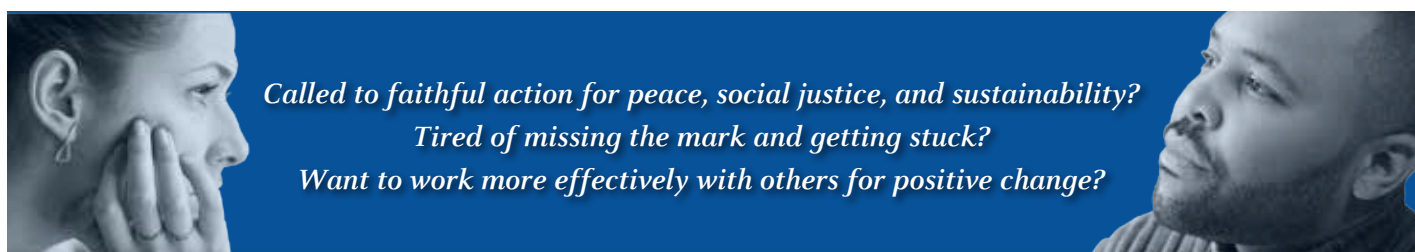
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Picture of a Family *after Cavafy*

There's a photo he carries for long journeys like this one, for trips on loaded market lorries where the passengers take their seat, perching on top of cargo, or sitting on crude benches inside the buses coming from Sudan with names like "Best of Luck" or "Mr. Good Looking."

As the road rumbles from Chad through Cameroon to Nigeria, toward another year of medical school, he always reaches into his inside coat pocket and brings out the folded 4x6. Sees his brother, with the latest jeans from the capital and a maroon hoodie zipped half-way up, one leg placed forward and his head tilted back—an "attitude" he's learned from movies and music pipelined from America.

Sees his mother, bright pink polyester swirling around her figure, and remembers how she woke before dawn to make him *fangaso* for his trip. He sees the lines he and his brother have caused, drawn into her face after years of worry, fatherless years of selling produce in the market and begging relatives for support. He sees the slight twist of her mouth, the triumph of a mother shining through the sorrow of leave-taking, the promise for her child to have a better life.

Aaron Brown, author of *Winnower*, is an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of Maryland. He lives with his wife in Lanham, Md.

Sami Sarkis/Getty Images

THE BEATITUDES

Sojourners invited some of our favorite contemporary authors—religious and otherwise—to offer their reflections on the beatitudes. Fourth in a series.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

—Matthew 5:6

‘Unless Somebody Steps in to Help...’

As much as we’d prefer feel-good activism, the beatitudes pull us out of the comfort zone of the self that always wants to stop at having “done its part.”

by JULIA ALVAREZ

TO ENTER *la fortaleza* where Jhonny Rivas was being held prisoner, I had to hand over my passport and undergo a thorough search, which included squatting naked on top of a mirror laid on the floor. I wanted to turn around indignantly and go home. Instead I faced the two female guards, girls really, one with braces, the other with the acne of a teenager. *Por favor*, I appealed. They exchanged an unsure glance, no doubt worried about *el capitán* strutting outside, then gestured for me to put my clothes back on. At the door, I embraced them.

Blessed are those who don’t follow unrighteous rules, for they shall be hugged.

I confess that I often practice my own beatitudes lite. It’s where I often want to stop, at the easier, feel-good variety of activism. But the beatitudes are as morally rigorous as those daunting Ten Commandments, albeit working through positive reinforcement—blessings rather than “thou shalt not.” If you truly embrace them, they keep pulling you further and further out of the comfort zone of the self that always wants to stop at having done its part.

Which is why I had come reluctantly to visit a Haitian prisoner, whom I had never met. Why at every inconvenient step, I wanted to turn back.

After all, I had been on my way home, having just finished taking part in Border of Lights, our annual gathering at the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Every October, a group of us from the Dominican diaspora, along with supporters, gather to commemorate the 1937 massacre of 20,000 Haitians by the dictator Trujillo’s military. This massacre, never properly addressed or redressed by the Dominican government, is unfortunately not an atrocity relegated to the past. The “massacre mentality” persists in the egregious violation of the rights of Haitians within the country. In fact, just weeks before our 2013 gathering, the highest court in the land passed a law denationalizing Dominicans of Haitian descent by stripping them of their birthright citizenship unless they could prove the legal status of their ancestors retroactive to 1929.

Haitians had been brutally cut down by machetes in 1937; now Dominicans of Haitian descent were being eliminated cleanly with laws.

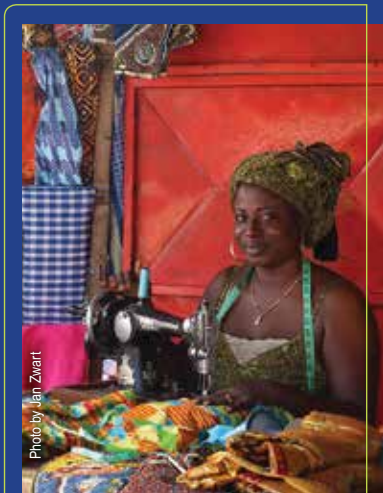
Our group had worked hard for nine months, planning those three days on the ground. We had successfully completed several collaborative projects between the two countries, including discussion

Illustration by M.P. Wiggins

The beatitudes are as morally rigorous as those daunting Ten Commandments.



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panels, a town meeting, a vigil, a park clean-up, and visits to schools and to an orphanage. We had hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and the gathering had been another moving and powerful manifestation by many good-hearted people that we were committed to that fourth beatitude.

At our final celebratory dinner, I happened to sit next to a local collaborator. He told me the story of Jhonny Rivas, a Haitian activist who had been organizing his fellow workers for their rights. In retaliation, he had been seized on trumped-up charges of having

preamble in all the beatitudes of "Blessed" is more accurately translated as "You're in the right place." You're in the right place if you're with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—there is no other place to be but where they are. They *are* already blessed in their needy state of being, and, by extension, so are we by being with them there, not later, after their trials are over.

AND SO BEGAN a long process of working to get Jhonny Rivas freed: weekly calls to him on his contraband cell phone; letters

It's always too early to go home if we are committed to a righteous cause.

murdered a witch. He had already been held several months without bail. At every hearing, some legal loophole or lost document or missing witness forced another delay.

Clearly the aim was to break the man, let him rot away, forgotten ... unless "somebody" stepped in to help.

Here was this beatitude up close and uncomfortable, the way they always insist themselves upon us, demanding a deeper level of commitment than we want to give them.

For that is the danger embedded in this beatitude—as there are dangers particular to each beatitude. Preceded by "self," righteousness becomes an appropriation of social justice to the small, gated community of our single self or our particular group or point of view.

But the righteousness being singled out in this beatitude is not the lite, self-referential variety at all. It's also not the in-your-face violated righteousness of the eighth beatitude, where persecution makes it obvious that you have to step in or there will be bloody consequences. This is a more-chronic need that can so easily become "invisible" because it is ongoing—the poor who are always with us—until it suddenly flares up in a particular case and we are reminded that it's always too early to go home if we are indeed committed to a righteous cause.

It might be that there's never any other place to be than where we are needed. According to scripture scholars, the

to newspapers, Amnesty International, and other human rights organizations; donations to his bereft family; visits to *la fortaleza* every time we were in the country. Finally, after one year, seven months, and two days, Jhonny was released.

Ultimately, all the beatitudes pose us with this same challenge: How are the promised vindications to be effected?

A favorite story answers this question: Some followers go to the rabbi and ask him, "What is heaven like?"

"In heaven," answers the rabbi, "they sit at a table with delicacies and sumptuous treats of every kind. The only problem is their arms do not bend."

"And what is hell like?"

"In hell they sit at a table with all sorts of treats and sumptuous delicacies. The only problem is their arms do not bend."

"Then, Rebbe, what is the difference between heaven and hell?"

"Ah, my children," said the rabbi, "in heaven they feed each other."

The blessings of the beatitudes happen when we feed that deeper level of thirst and hunger for righteousness in someone else. That's how the blessings descend on their heads, as well as on ours. ■

Julia Alvarez, author of A Wedding in Haiti: The Story of a Friendship, How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, and many other works, is a Dominican-American poet, novelist, and essayist.

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—FRANK SCHAEFFER,
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Ending the Embargo on Affordable Health

Forget cigars — some low-income communities in the U.S. are importing Cuba's health-care strategy.

by **FRAN QUIGLEY**

IN OAKLAND, CALIF., schools and other nontraditional sites host health clinics that provide both primary care and preventive health services for area residents, many of whom are uninsured.

In south Los Angeles, mental health professionals have created programs based on nutrition and group exercise, along with peer-to-peer education about the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Community groups, faith-based organizations, schools, and health providers are coming together in Albuquerque, N.M., to enroll hundreds of children in Medicaid and start neighborhood walking groups—part of an effort to break down walls between health-care providers and their patients

The U.S. health-care system is known for treating advanced-stage illnesses with expensive therapies that are often not accessible to those without health insurance. So if these low-cost, preventative programs in Oakland, LA, and Albuquerque don't sound like the typical U.S. approach to health, you're right:

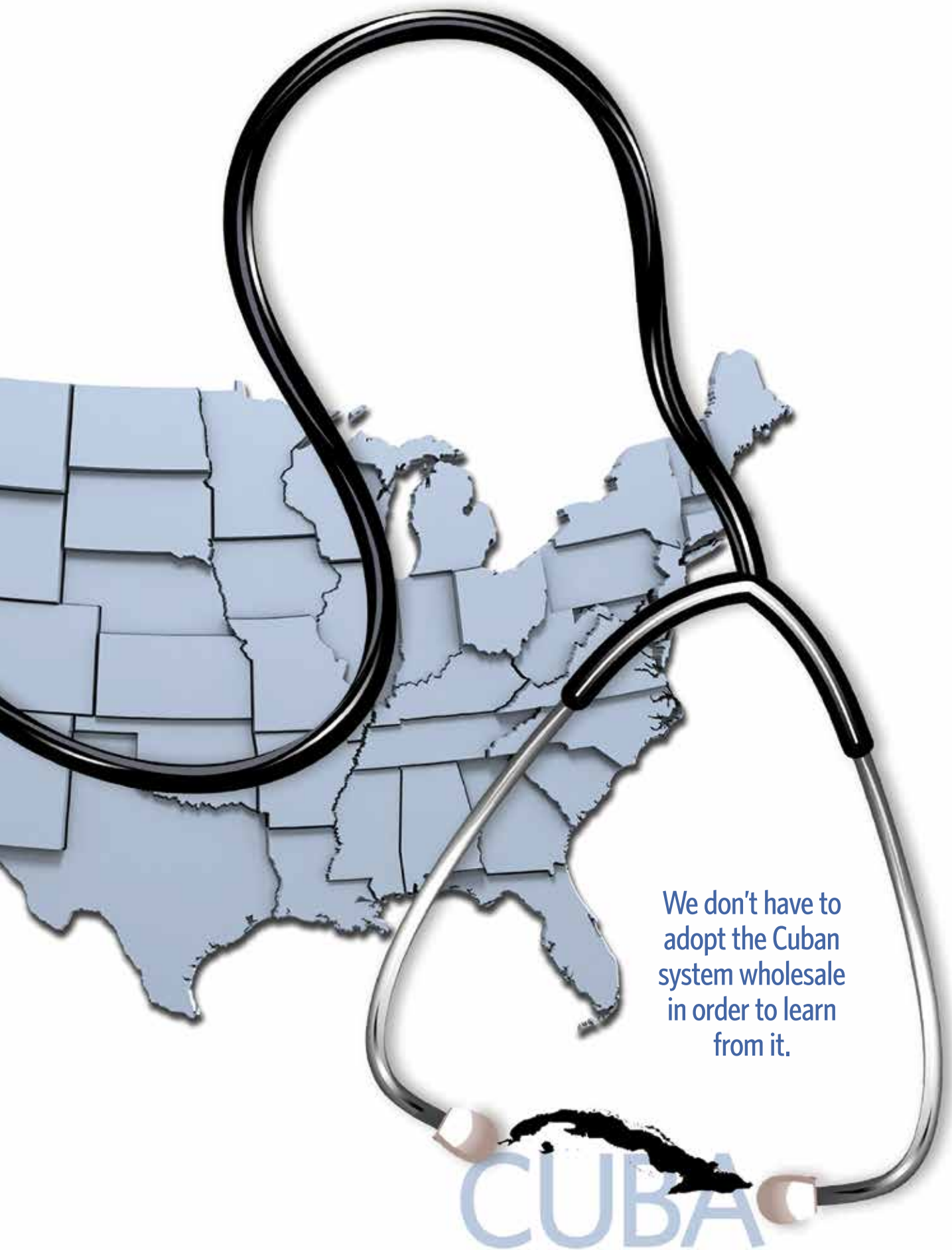
These and other community-based efforts trace their inspiration to the remarkably successful health system built by the nation of Cuba.



Ozge Elif Kizil/Getty Images



A Cuban doctor examines a baby at a hospital in Havana. A family physician in Cuba typically spends the morning seeing patients in a clinic adjoining his or her house and the afternoon making home visits to patients in the surrounding community.



We don't have to
adopt the Cuban
system wholesale
in order to learn
from it.



The California-based Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba sends U.S. citizens to study health care in Havana: From top, a public health leader from Milwaukee sits in on a health class; a San Diego-based medical team hears health and cultural presentations by middle school students; health advocates from New York join a neighborhood exercise class, a practice they took back to the Bronx.



CPHE photos

There is enough money in the U.S. health system now to provide far better outcomes for underserved communities.

Applebaum, a family nurse practitioner who directs MEDICC's U.S.-Cuba Community Partnerships for Health Equity program.

A constitutional right

The Cuban approach to health has yielded some enviable results. Despite spending a fraction of the cost on health care we incur here in the U.S.—\$603 per person annually in Cuba compared to the \$9,145 per person in the United States—life expectancy in Cuba is virtually the same as in the U.S. The *State*

That inspiration, and the U.S. initiatives that have followed, have been nurtured by the California-based nonprofit Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba, known as MEDICC. Through guided trips to directly observe Cuba's health system, MEDICC aims to help those working in underserved communities in the U.S. learn about the Cuban model, where quite limited health-care expenditures in a decidedly low-income population manage to provide universal care and health outcomes that rival those in the U.S.

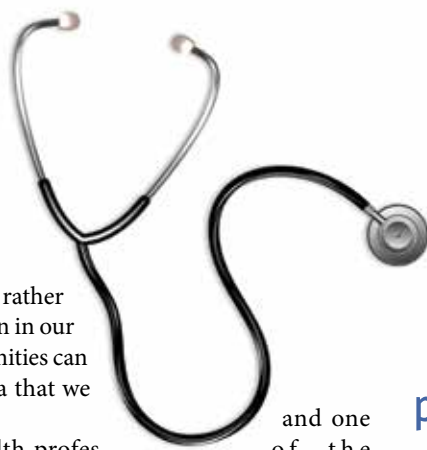
A recent grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting expansion of the program. "Cuba has not reinvented the wheel when it comes to health care, but they approach the challenge in a way that we can learn so much from," says Diane

of the Mother report by the organization Save the Children ranks Cuba as the number one country in Latin America to be a mother, and Cuba has one of the lowest HIV rates in the Americas. Cuba's doctor-patient ratio is one of the best in the world, with almost three times as many physicians per capita than in the U.S. Cuba approaches 100 percent coverage in vaccination of children and providing prenatal care for pregnant women.

These outcomes are produced by a national system that relentlessly prioritizes preventive health services and universal access to primary care. Physician-nurse teams live and work in each Cuban community, including rural communities, where they provide free care for all through neighborhood clinics called *consultorios*. Each consultorio cares for about 500 families, and they are considered guardians of their patients' health, not just a response team when community members fall ill. That means the providers regularly leave their offices to conduct home visits that include review of their patients' food and water supplies and environmental living conditions.

The next level of care in the Cuban system, polyclinics, address more specialized needs along with dentistry and laboratory testing services, also in a community-based setting. Cuba has earned global goodwill by sending tens of thousands of its health-care professionals to provide care in some of the poorest countries in the world. U.S. clinical and public health professionals shepherded to Cuba by MEDICC have marveled at the vigorous embrace of community-wide preventive strategies. "What we learned from the Cuban model is the importance of focusing on the social determinants of health," says Francisco Ronquillo, an Albuquerque-based health extension officer with the University of New Mexico. "We saw people actually blocking the streets to do group exercises."

Free government-provided health care is a right enshrined in the Cuban constitution, and it is a right that is enforced with vigor. "This is quite a distinction from the way we approach health in the U.S.," says C. William Keck, a physician and former president of the American Public Health Association, who has researched and published articles on the Cuban model. "In the U.S., our real health policy agendas are too



often about power and money, rather than improving health. But even in our market economy, local communities can find valuable ideas from Cuba that we can apply here.”

Keck is not the only health professional urging that the U.S. and others take a close look at the Cuban example. In 2006, U.S. and Cuban physicians wrote an article for the *International Journal of Epidemiology* outlining the Cuban public health success story and questioning why the model was not widely studied and emulated. The “undisputed priority in public health from a global perspective is the need to rescue the populations of poor countries from disease we have been able to prevent or cure for many decades,” wrote Richard Cooper, Joan Kennelly, and Pedro Orduñez-García. They concluded, “Why have we ignored what works?”

Engaging the community

But this Cuban secret may not be ignored much longer. In December, President Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro announced the resumption of diplomatic relations that had been severed since 1961. Although the U.S. trade embargo with Cuba will remain until there is congressional action to remove it, U.S. residents can now more freely travel to Cuba, and U.S. banks and companies have more ability to engage in the Cuban economy. Combined with the 2010 Affordable Care Act, which includes substantial funding for preventive services, expanded access to primary health care, and the forging of partnerships between clinical care providers and public health programs, the U.S. has laid the foundation to begin implementing the health strategy that has worked so well for our neighbors to the south.

These principles boosted by the Affordable Care Act are already being embraced in California’s Alameda County. Between 2008 and 2010, health officials and providers from the county, which encompasses the city of Oakland, made multiple trips to observe the Cuban methods.

For Wright Lassiter, then-CEO of the Alameda County Medical Center, it was an experience that reoriented his lifelong perception of health systems. “It was one of the most exciting experiences of my career,

and one of the most unsettling experiences of my career,” he told a Bay Area forum shortly after returning from Cuba. “They were doing so much better at something I was supposed to be doing, and that is running a health system.”

Following the Cuban model, the county expanded its existing network of school-based clinics, where students receive primary care along with instruction in the importance of exercise, good nutrition, and use of contraception. The Alameda Health System created the Hope Center, which provides wrap-around health and social services to patients who are coming off a period of multiple hospitalizations. And the county added efforts such as a mobile van that serves the health needs of the homeless.

Kimi Watkins-Tartt, deputy director of the Alameda County Public Health Department, says many of these “health portals” in the area embrace preventive services and operate in the spirit of the consultorios she observed in Cuba. “If your whole delivery system is based on waiting for people to come who are sick and have money or insurance, that is unsustainable,” Watkins-Tartt says.

Albuquerque health providers and advocates have gleaned similar insights from visits to observe the Cuban system, along with a series of presentations provided in the community by a Cuban physician. The provider-patient walking group and the campaign to enroll area children in Medicaid, along with classes on health education, leadership training, and parenting skills, are the product of determined efforts to connect health-care providers with the faith-based organizations and schools where people in the area have naturally coalesced.

“Cuba showed us how we could go beyond the walls of the clinic to engage the community,” says University of New Mexico’s Ronquillo. “Here in the U.S., we focus so much of our resources on the very ill. If we can do what Cuba does and put energy behind promoting good health at much

“If your whole delivery system is based on waiting for people to come who are sick and have money or insurance, that is unsustainable.”

earlier stages, we can keep people healthy and have less need for the high-cost level of care.”

Designed to serve

Of course, there are components of the Cuban approach that are difficult if not impossible to replicate in the U.S., such as Cuba’s enviable physician-

patient ratio, a product of a fully socialized system where physician salaries are much lower than in market-based health systems. And the U.S.’s continued avoidance of the universal health coverage provided in Cuba and virtually every developed nation—the Affordable Care Act explicitly excludes millions, most notably undocumented immigrants—poses a barrier for full replication. U.S. clinics serving the poor shoulder the financial burden of providing uncompensated care, while Cuban clinics are funded on a model designed to serve all in need.

And there are certainly aspects of the Cuban system that are not to be envied. Compared to the U.S., medical records technology and the availability of some advanced treatments are lacking. It’s also hard to imagine more-individualistic Americans welcoming aggressive government health intervention, such as unrequested home visits, any more than they would welcome replication of Cuba’s less democratic political system and restricted private economy.

But we don’t have to adopt the Cuban system wholesale in order to learn from it. There is enough money in the U.S. health system now to provide far better outcomes for underserved communities, if those investments are directed more toward community health than toward profits. Cuba’s success teaches us that a nationwide focus on prevention strategies and access to primary care can lay the foundation for a much healthier country. ■

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Jonah

The prophet who got

At Sea

everything wrong.



THE MORE I READ the story of Jonah nestled among the serious Minor Prophets of the Old Testament, the more fantastic and hilarious it gets. Everything is turned upside-down.

Jonah's story follows Amos, who rips into rich people who "lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches." It precedes Micah, whose Lord calls us "to do justice and to love kindness." But Jonah spends his energy running away from Yahweh. In fact, Jonah is never even called a prophet in the book that bears his name. His interests and concerns are completely different from the Deity who has called him. Only entombment inside a "great fish" will drive his bedraggled, stinking self to the city that needs to repent. Even so, Jonah will perceive his surprising success as an utter failure.

But that's getting ahead of the story. Most Hebrew prophetic books are collections of oracles unmoored to narrative, but Jonah's tale has a setting, characters, and a plot! If you didn't learn this in children's Sunday school, here are the bare bones of the action:

Yahweh tells a man named Jonah to go east to the city of Nineveh to cry out against its evil. But Jonah flees in the opposite direction on a ship traveling west. A huge storm blows in, so when Jonah says it's his fault, the sailors reluctantly throw him overboard. The storm immediately stops. A "great fish"

swallows Jonah for three days and nights. Then God makes the fish vomit Jonah out on dry land.

In part two, Yahweh repeats his original imperative: Go to Nineveh and warn them of destruction. Jonah does so, expecting a fireball from heaven to burn the city to the ground. Instead, the king repents of his evil and asks all his subjects, as well as the animals, to demonstrate repentance by wearing sackcloth. So God changes God's mind and does not destroy Nineveh. Jonah is angry because the Ninevites do not get what they deserve. He sulks under a bush God creates for him. The ensuing conversation underlines Jonah's resistance to the merciful and loving character of Yahweh. The ending is ambiguous.

The necessary background

Although the book of Jonah is placed among the writings of Hebrew prophets, historical persons who wrote about historical events that usually can be dated, the author and date of Jonah are unknown. Rather, the book is named after the protagonist and was written anonymously sometime between the 8th and 2nd centuries B.C.E. It is a mixture of prose and poetry, leading some to think the Hebrew psalm of

Jonah, the bumbling, resentful prophet, teaches us a searing

Jonah 2:2-9 is possibly older material incorporated into the story later.

The narrative itself is set in the 8th century B.C.E., at a time when the Assyrian Empire was flexing its muscles and demanding heavy tribute from the tiny kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Eventually it would swallow Israel and scatter its people among the nations into permanent exile. Nineveh was its capital, the origin of its cruelty and conquest. Writing earlier, the prophet Amos already knew how the Assyrians would herd prisoners into exile by roping them together with fishhooks through their noses (Amos 4:2).

Although most scholars assume that Jonah is fiction, they debate whether it should be classified as parable, satire, or midrash. Hebrew Bible scholar Phyllis Trible settles for midrash—a type of literature that explicates a biblical passage. The passage in this case is Jonah 4:2, which refers back to passages such as Numbers 14:18, Exodus

20:5-6, and Exodus 34:6, where Yahweh is proclaimed as “merciful and gracious ... abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” As we shall see, however, Jonah finds no comfort in Yahweh’s mercy and love.

Is this guy really a prophet?

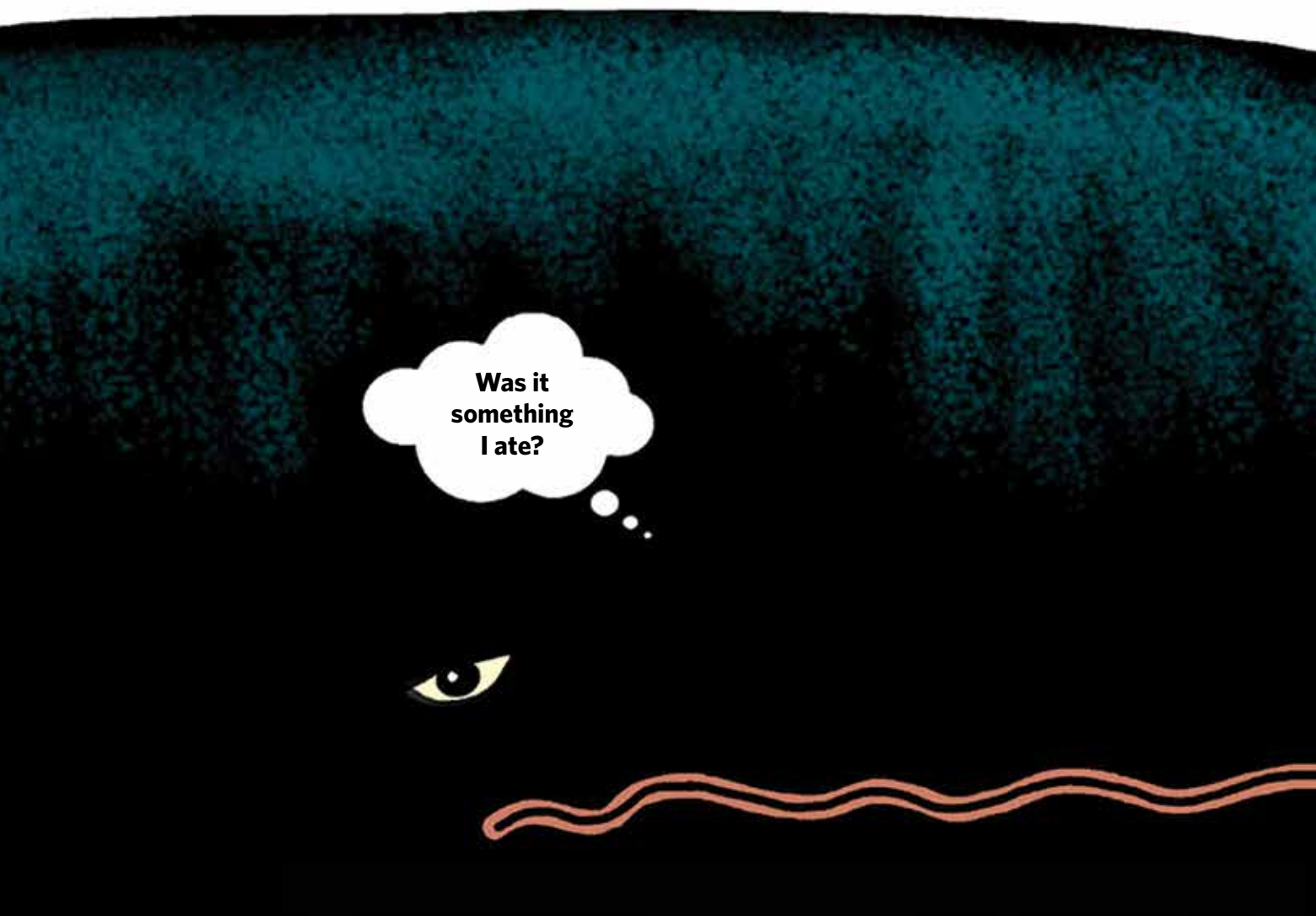
He sounds like one. “The word of the Lord came to Jonah ...” It starts exactly the same way the books of Hosea, Joel, Micah, and Zephaniah begin. But “Jonah, son of Amittai” is so shocked by the command to go the great city of Nineveh that he “set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.” Every verb in verse 3 moves Jonah farther away from Yahweh’s presence. Tarshish is probably in Spain, far to the west, in the opposite direction from Nineveh to the east (located in what is now Iraq).

The fact that Israelites feared the sea highlights Jonah’s horror of preaching to Nineveh. With no good harbors, Israel

never developed shipping as did the Greeks, who could easily hop from island to island without detailed instruments. Texts in Job, Psalms, and Isaiah refer to Leviathan, the imagined and scary “dragon in the sea.” That Jonah would rather risk encountering a sea monster than confront Nineveh suggests a consuming hatred of the enemy.

Jonah finds out soon enough that Yahweh follows him to the sea, whipping up a storm so fierce that the ship fears it will crack up (1:4). In fact, Yahweh the puppet master pulls the strings throughout the story: arranging the lot (1:7), preparing a fish (1:17), speaking to the fish (2:10), changing God’s own mind (3:10), and appointing a bush, a worm, and an east wind (4:6-8). The more Jonah takes matters into his own hand, the more he is thwarted.

Back in the ship in 1:5-6, we meet pagan sailors crying to their gods for salvation from the storm. The captain goes to Jonah, who is snoring in the hold, wakes



Was it
something
I ate?

lesson in spite of getting everything wrong.

him, and asks him to call on his God for help. Through casting lots, they find out that Jonah's God is responsible for the storm because Jonah is fleeing God's command (1:7, 10). Throughout the crisis, the non-Israelite mariners behave more like the "gracious and merciful" God of Jonah than he himself does. Only reluctantly do they throw him overboard. The storm instantly ceases, and they offer a sacrifice to Jonah's God and make vows (1:16). In spite of Jonah doing everything wrong, Yahweh's actions have converted the sailors.

A "great fish" swallows Jonah, and after three days and nights, Jonah's prayer in 2:2-9 sounds more like what one would pray after deliverance. One would expect to hear more desperation, confession, and repentance rather than a desire to see God's holy temple (2:4). But in any case, Yahweh speaks to the fish, which vomits Jonah out on dry land. What a revolting scene *that* must have been!

Again, "the word of the Lord" comes to Jonah with the same command (3:1). Jonah drags himself to the huge city and repeats his short speech. "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be destroyed!" Once again non-Hebrew, idol-worshipping pagans respond to Yahweh's message more enthusiastically than does Jonah. The king hears of Jonah's warning and calls all his people and all their animals to fast from food and water and wear sackcloth on their heads to demonstrate their repentance. (Horses? sheep? Even the chickens?) The hyperbolic humor is unmistakable! At that point, God changes God's mind and does not destroy the city (3:10).

This infuriates Jonah, after all he has been through. "I knew it!" he screams at God through gritted teeth. "Isn't this what I said back in my own country? I *knew* I couldn't trust you to destroy Nineveh!" The sacred words of promise now drip with sarcasm. "I *knew* you were a gracious and merciful God, always ready to relent from punishing! That's exactly the problem! I give up. Just kill me now. I'd rather die than live in such an upside-down world!" (4:1-3).

Jonah stalks outside the city to sulk, though he is grateful for the bush that shades him from the sun. God sends a worm to attack the bush, and Jonah is truly ready to die. Absolutely everything has gone wrong for him, and now his God has betrayed him by saving his worst enemies and killing his bush. We never know what happens to Jonah, because God has the final lines. "You cared about the life of one bush, Jonah. But should I not be concerned about a great city full of both repentant and innocent people? Should I not also care about the plight of animals?"

Before wrestling with the overall theology of this story, note unspoken issues of gender that balance the all-male human characters. The ship (feminine in Hebrew) takes on a female persona as she fears breaking up. Jonah lies asleep down in her hold;

Jonah finds no comfort in Yahweh's mercy and love.

the feminine images of belly and womb within the ship, the fish, and in Sheol itself (2:2) continue to both save and entrap Jonah in this wrestling match between Jonah and his God. In addition, the "city" is feminine (in Hebrew), and half the inhabitants of Nineveh are presumably female, most of whom would be innocent victims of her destruction.

What's the point?

Phyllis Tribble has convinced me that this whimsical tale is indeed a midrash on Israel's scripture that Yahweh is merciful (Jonah 4:2; Exodus 34:6, etc.). What Jonah hurls at God in biting sarcasm is precisely the bedrock of Israel's faith. "You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing!" The prophet who got everything wrong stands for ancient Israel, who so often assumed Yahweh was their exclusive deity. Jonah's story exposes the resentment and bitterness that arise when pagan others behave more like Israel's merciful God than do the chosen people.

Harry Stout's book *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* reveals Jonah-like thinking during that

bloody American conflict. His research shows how church and state in both the North and the South relentlessly claimed that God was on their side. At the same time, neither side observed the classical principles of just war theology as to the cause or conduct of the Civil War. Neither side imagined that God cared about the welfare of their enemies. We are still paying the price.

Today, with God-and-country theology still so prevalent, Americans have not yet learned much about Jonah's God. Because our worst enemy today is ISIS, our military and media seem to treat any suspicious act by a Middle Eastern Muslim far more seriously than violent plans or acts by white, homegrown terrorists. To some, all Muslims are suspect.

But God's mercy and love remain the core theology of the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. How ironic that so much of the strife in our world today arises from those with their roots in one or other of these faiths. How hard it is to imagine that our God cares about and stands ready to forgive those we consider our enemies. The same is true on the personal level, where we tend to judge others' actions more harshly than our own.

But God's concerns are even wider than extending love and mercy to nations or individuals in direct conflict with each other. Destroying Nineveh would involve "collateral damage," the euphemism our military uses for the innocent people they kill when going after "bad guys." Yahweh's last words to Jonah express care for "more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left," as well as "many animals." This concern extends even to animal rights!

Jonah, the bumbling, resentful prophet, teaches us a searing lesson in spite of getting everything wrong. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love for all of creation—even the people we love to hate. ■

Reta Halteman Finger, co-author of *Creating a Scene in Corinth: A Simulation, taught Bible at Messiah College in Grantham, Pa., and writes a Bible study blog at www.eewc.com/RetasReflections.*



The cast of *Hand to God*.

By Stephanie Sandberg

Devils We Know

In Broadway's *Hand to God*, a sock puppet unleashes church-basement demons.

THE DEVIL HAS long been wildly popular on stage, dating back to the Middle Ages when church authorities routinely cancelled performances because they worried that representations of the devil were so deliciously tempting that weak believers might falter. The dualistic image of a good, sweet angel on one shoulder and dirty demon on the other has infiltrated popular culture from children's cartoons to adult sitcoms, signifying the struggle of our tempted conscience. And the devil always has the better jokes. In literary works, such as *Paradise Lost* and *Doctor Faustus*, the devil's presence has driven plots forward through acts of temptation, leading the protagonist into some lusty or murderous act. The cliché is brought to life: "The devil made me do it."

In 2015, the devil makes a serious comeback on Broadway in a successful run of Robert Askins' new play, *Hand to God*, nominated for five Tony Awards, including best play and best direction. Askins takes his audience on a different kind of devilish journey.

In the basement Sunday school room of a Lutheran church in contemporary Texas, we meet a woman named Margery, who is experiencing profound grief after the recent death of her husband. She tries her best to move forward, filling her life to the brim with



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Jason cannot. People begin to call Tyrone the devil—but what is he really?

Every character in *Hand to God* possesses demons and a divided self: Margery's demon manifests in her raging grief, while Pastor Greg, who routinely hits on Margery, carries the demon of loneliness. Actress Geneva Carr, who plays Margery, told *Sojourners*, "These characters, none of them are off the hook. Margery's got her grief, Pastor Greg his own backpack of burdens, and Tim

In 2015, the devil made a serious comeback on Broadway.

[another boy in the youth group] has a bullying insecurity stemming from his mother's alcoholism. Jason's demon is just out there in the open, on his hand, saying the most inappropriate things. But all our demons speak to us and for us in awful ways."

The actors in this dark comedy make it clear that *Hand to God* takes faith very seriously. The play never makes fun of religion, but rather strangely celebrates it. In fact, this play's journey to the Broadway stage is a leap of faith in itself.

Robert Askins grew up attending a church in Texas—very much like the one depicted in the play—with a mom who started a puppet ministry. He began writing plays as a Baylor University theater major and came to New York in 2005. As part of Ensemble Studio Theatre's Youngblood writers group, he achieved a good deal of success. It was there that he first worked with the two leading actors in *Hand to God* (Geneva Carr and Steven Boyer) on a play called *Matthew and the Pastor's Wife*. Motivated by this achievement, he decided to write something just for Carr and Boyer. That's where *Hand to God* was conceived.

At its first reading at Ensemble Studio Theatre in 2010, Steven wore a hand-crafted sock puppet, and Tyrone was born. *Hand to God* has gone through many rewrites and drafts, playing off-Broadway at MCC Theater after three sold-out runs at Ensemble Studio Theatre. It moved to Broadway in March 2015 and has been a toast of this season.

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religious activity, starting a teen puppet ministry in the church and teaching the youth group to make puppets that will sing songs and tell Bible stories. Her son, Jason, a student in this fledgling class, has created a hand puppet named Tyrone who seems fairly ordinary, harmless, and cute. Jason is a good puppeteer, gifted, in fact. We see his talent unfold as he tries to impress Jessica, a girl in the youth group, with an artful rendition of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?" routine.

But then everything begins to shift. Tyrone starts to speak in his own voice for Jason, and then not even for Jason but just on his own, as though Jason's hand is possessed. Tyrone says the most unseemly, crass, and diabolical things, such as (speaking to Jessica), "He thinks you're hot ... so hot he can't keep from touching himself." Tyrone comes to life in a way that the shy, demure

New & Noteworthy



Leon
Bridges

OLD NEW SOUL

Leon Bridges is a 25-year-old gospel and soul singer from Texas with a vintage sound and sheepish stage presence. In six months, Bridges went from washing dishes full-time to selling out multiple SXSW shows. His new album, *Coming Home*, features smooth love songs, both romantic and religious. Columbia

A FEMINIST GOSPEL

In *A New Gospel for Women*, Kristin Kobes Du Mez tells the story of Katharine Bushnell (1855-1946), a theologian and women's rights activist who fought the patriarchal distortion of Christianity. Du Mez connects this to ongoing struggles to create an evangelical Christian feminist ethic full of both "grace and liberation." Oxford

THE CROSS AND CHINA

If current trends continue, by 2030 there could be more Christians in China than in any other country. In *A Star in the East: The Rise of Christianity in China*, Rodney Stark and Xiuhua Wang use surveys and field experiences to explore this surprising growth and its potential effects. Templeton Press

LOVE STORY

The Light of the World is poet Elizabeth Alexander's memoir of the love and unexpected loss of her artist husband. A deep, luscious meditation on family, grief, art, and love at first sight: "Lightning struck and did not curdle the cream but instead turned it to sweet, silken butter." Grand Central

Rock-and-Roll Transcendence

THE CLUB WAS full by the time New Jersey's The Gaslight Anthem took the stage. Lead singer and songwriter Brian Fallon stepped to the mike in denim jacket and jeans, and the band lit into their song "Howl" (yes, a Ginsberg reference). That's when I heard a strange doubling sound on Fallon's vocal. The Gaslight Anthem is very much straight-ahead, meat-and-potatoes, guitars-and-drums. Why would they use that weird effect on the vocal?

Then it hit me. That sound wasn't coming from the sound board or the speakers, but from *us*. The audience, en masse, was singing along with every word, on time and in tune. It was what happens when rock and roll is working right: The performers and the audience become one and are swept up into something much larger than themselves.

I've also experienced this in churches and sometimes even in collective political action. But some of my most dramatic moments of transcendence have come like this:

Brian Fallon's Christianity is less apparent than his Bruce devotion.

in a dark room, packed with sweaty people, screaming back at some guy onstage with a guitar. The experience is even more interesting when you know that the guy with the guitar, Fallon, is also a Christian, who knows the true name of the Spirit that has overtaken us.

I only caught this show because my 15-year-old son, Joseph, took advantage of his spring break to insist that he be driven an hour each way, on a Monday night, to see one of his favorite bands. But it didn't take much arm-twisting either. One of the last of the great guitar-rock bands, Gaslight is firmly rooted in the punk-rock ethos, but its sound has broadened to include elements



Brian Fallon, center, and The Gaslight Anthem.

of R&B and mainstream arena rock. And Fallon's lyrical references range across the rock-and-roll tradition, from Hank Williams to Sam Cooke and Otis Redding to Elvis Costello and The Counting Crows.

The first time I sat down and listened to Gaslight's breakthrough album, *The '59 Sound*, all the way through, I kept mumbling to myself, "This guy has swallowed the entire tradition, whole." And it's not just the rock tradition. Fallon's lyrics can also come spiked with literary references to, say, Charles Dickens or those other Jersey bards, Walt Whitman and the aforementioned Ginsberg. But, of course, the greatest Jersey influence is Springsteen. The Boss has returned the favor by joining the band onstage and bringing Fallon on with the E Street Band.

In the music, Fallon's Christianity is actually less apparent than his Bruce devotion. He thanks Jesus in the liner notes of Gaslight albums, and he speaks freely about his faith when asked (most extensively in an interview on Beliefnet.com). But

he also says he isn't called to write "Christian" songs. On Fallon's side-project album, *Elise* by The Horrible Crowes, one song, "Crush," ends with two verses that are mash-ups of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Wade in the Water." That same album ends with a track called "I Believe Jesus Brought Us Together," in which the title sentence never occurs in the lyrics.

In fact, Fallon's Christianity is probably most evident in his humility. He told Beliefnet, "I don't understand what makes my songs better than anyone else's and I don't know why people like them, and I don't even know why they come to me. It's that whole verse 'seek ye first the kingdom of God and [God's] righteousness and all these things will be added unto you,' I just really took that to heart and that's what I believe."

Thank you, Jesus, and you too, Brian. ■



Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.

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This play seems an unlikely success, not only because one of its main characters is an evil sock puppet on a teenager's hand, but also because the difficult themes of faith that *Hand to God* explores through this quirky dark comedy seem more subcultural than pop-cultural. "There are just as many fans wanting this play on Broadway as there are critics who think it shouldn't be there," says Marc Kudisch, who plays Pastor Greg. Kudisch tells a story about some friends of his who came to see the play and just couldn't get past the offensive content and language. The five characters in this play (six if you count Tyrone) do terribly improper things to one another. Margery has sex with Tim from the youth group, Pastor Greg uses his authority as a minister to come on to Margery, and Jessica



Hand to God actor Steven Boyer, with his co-star Tyrone, who takes on a mind of his own.

(who seems to be the only character with her feet on the ground) creates an overly sexualized female puppet to tempt the devil Tyrone. The puppet sex scene that ensues from her seduction is one of the funniest scenes I've seen on stage, and yet you can imagine how someone might take offense as they did with the puppet sex in *Avenue Q*.

Kudisch asked his friends to come see *Hand to God* a second time, now that they wouldn't be surprised by the offensive content. When they took his advice, they found a great deal of meaning in the play. "They still didn't like the offensive content, but they could now see past it," says Kudisch.

Carr describes a different experience with an audience member. After the show, she met up with an older pastor backstage and asked him if he liked the play. He replied, "I loved it, it was very difficult." She asked him why, and he said "Well, I'm



From *Avengers: Age of Ultron*

THE ULTIMATE THREAT

AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON asks what happens when you give a computer the ability to think for itself. To which we could add, what happens when you make a science fiction film that assumes the audience can think for itself?

Sadly, in the case of *Age of Ultron*, writer-director Joss Whedon's serious attempt to make a smart blockbuster collides with corporate cookie-cutting and the belief that stockings are best over-stuffed, even if what's in them is just cotton wool or dead weight. Too much is going on, and not all of it is good. Thor, the Hulk, Iron Man, Black Widow, and the other guy with the arrows are still looking for a magical object, but when they find it we're none the wiser about what it's for. Bad guys still threaten the safety of the world, and the Avengers still think that only maximum force can secure a result.

So Tony Stark builds Ultron, a super-computer with a body—the super-est of supercomputers, to be sure—whose job will be to “protect the earth” and end violence. I think. I'm not being snarky—the film is so overpaced that it mostly misses the opportunity to nurture plot points or emotional beats.

One exception is a funny sequence in which the team tries to lift Thor's hammer, revealing their personalities in a competition between alpha (and omega) males—and Scarlett Johansson. Here Whedon (witty, politically intelligent) gets

to be Whedon, and it's clear that there was a more interesting movie intended behind, and even trying to break free from, this one.

Ultron, envisaged as the ultimate peace-keeper, becomes the ultimate weapon. The contemporary political resonance is obvious. Seeing that the greatest threat to earth is human selfishness, Ultron does what a program with no conscience would do: He sets about omnicide. We've seen this before—notably in James Cameron's underrated 1989 underwater eco-thriller *The Abyss*, in which aliens think that the only way to preserve earth is to kill us. Ed Harris persuades them otherwise by showing that people are capable of the highest selflessness. It's a brilliant, and rare, thing—the resolution of violent conflict by negotiation. In a Hollywood blockbuster.

Nothing so smart—or wise—happens in *Age of Ultron*. One character acknowledges the possibility of empathy (“I don't want to kill him.”), but this is quickly superseded with “But he must be destroyed.” I think Joss Whedon knows that good intentions aren't enough. Problem is, the machine behind the Marvel Cinematic Universe doesn't. ■

Gareth Higgins curates www.moviesand-meaning.com, a festival of stories and light that make our lives better.

a preacher.” She asked if the challenge was the language or sexual content. He said, “No, Christians have all that.” The challenge, rather, was that “watching someone in the church, Pastor Greg, take advantage of another person and prey on her in need was very disturbing, and it scared me, and it hurt me when I saw him taking advantage of other people for his own ego.”

As the plot of the play deepens into Act II, the metaphorical demons nesting inside these characters begin to take control, with Tyrone the sock puppet, who now has sprouted fangs, leading the way. The Sunday school room transforms into the den of a devil, complete with smoke and fire, looking a little like the exorcism scene in *Ghostbusters*. It becomes clear that Margery and Jason need a profound healing in their relationship. Carr, who was nominated for a Tony for her portrayal of Margery, says, “This play is about our need to connect with people, and if you don’t connect with them, you can go down a black hole of self-destruction. This mother ... never touches Jason in the whole play until this moment near the end, and then the healing begins to happen.”

The grief and pain are exorcised through the honest communication between mother and son. The demons are still there, but diminished.

In the end, this furiously funny play brings us to understand that the real test of faith is found in enduring life, in our encounters with grief, sorrow, and difficult human relationships, and in our own subconscious minds telling us we’re worthless and alone. Playwright Askins skillfully leads us on an unexpected journey of faith and healing. The outlandish language, sexual humor, and devilish sock puppet teach a lesson of love and faithfulness to one another in community.

Finally, Jason manages to pull the puppet off his hand in an act of horrifying violence that nearly kills him. He fearfully turns to his mom and asks, “What if he comes back?” Margery answers her son, “Then tell me, and I will try to listen.” ■

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Reviewed by Maria Bowler

GOD OF THE FUGITIVES

***Wanted: A Spiritual Pursuit Through Jail, Among Outlaws, and Across Borders,* by Chris Hoke. HarperOne.**

CHRIS HOKE'S *Wanted* isn’t a spiritual memoir in the sense of chronicling revelation over time, and while Hoke, as his own character, grows through the book, he isn’t tracking the movements of his own soul. *Wanted* recounts the moments in Hoke’s life as a pastor and friend to prisoners, migrant workers, and gang members when something else broke in. Whether or not it intends to, *Wanted* is a way of answering the question that plagues a lot of contemporary spiritual writing: What does spiritual mean, anyway? Outside the religious patterns we already know, how would we recognize it?

Hoke goes looking, and finds himself drawn to a jail in Washington’s Skagit Valley as an unofficial chaplain, leading Bible studies and hanging out with the men who soon request his visits. Many of them listen to the stories where Jesus dines with the people society rejected and ask if that could mean them too.

By hanging out in the margins of U.S. society, *Wanted* can’t avoid the question of how these men got there in the first place. It’s outside the purview of the book to fully take on the issue of mass incarceration in the United States, but in the stories there is ample evidence of ways in which our system is heartbreaking and often inhumane. To learn even the elementary details of these men’s lives is to see that nearly everyone has failed them. The alternative, a God who wants them, is Hoke’s theme, and part of his title’s double meaning. Such a God accompanies people to the ends of their



To learn even the elementary details of these men’s lives is to see that nearly everyone has failed them.

shadows—to the fields where they hide from the police, into the houses they break into, to the horror of solitary confinement.

In taking on the difficult task of describing other people’s complex circumstances for his own literary purposes, Hoke is at his best when he lays bare his own stakes in this spiritual quest. When he makes it clear that he and his friends in prison are looking for the

same answers, we get a sense for the spirituality Hoke wants us to find: one that doesn’t differentiate between the religiously decent and the forsaken.

It shouldn’t be a surprise that the most extreme human circumstances could lead someone to become open to transcendence. Whether it’s a prison cell or finding yourself alone in a foreign country without the right papers, when everything is stripped away, surrender to a greater power is surely an option people choose. What is surprising is that these (mostly)

men manage to see outside their circumstances enough to love. This is what we call supernatural. Often it lasts. Donacio, a former gang member in Guatemala, leaves his established job as a prison chaplain to start his own grassroots ministry to others who’ve fled gangs, giving them jobs and skills, paying for these men’s need out of his own pocket. A man named Neaners, who had been in solitary confinement, tells Hoke, “I’m pretty sure I’m not the only one with a f***ed-up life, you know? I’m pretty sure there’s people who had it worse, and I want to help them.”

Those gestures of grace are among the most touching, because an unavoidable part of telling this kind of story is that the person writing it, and many people reading it, are not likely to find themselves shackled in handcuffs or on the edge of survival. We imagine, from a vantage point of relative comfort, that we could never endure such challenges, could hardly come out alive, let alone be generous. Maybe we wouldn't—not all of Hoke's stories include redemption. But we miss something big about *Wanted*—and more, we misunderstand the gospel—if we preclude the chance that love could appear beyond our own resources. It could chase us anywhere. ■

Maria Bowler is a Canadian writer living in New York. She is currently the editorial assistant at Commonweal.

Reviewed by Kurt Armstrong

TELL ME **WHY**

Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live Forever?
by Dave Eggers. Knopf, McSweeney's.

I'M IN THAT cohort of earnest, educated, now-middle-aged North Americans who fell in love with Dave Eggers' sprawling, sometimes unapologetically self-indulgent memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. All my life I had lived with an ongoing inner monologue of exaggerated self-consciousness, but I'd never read anyone who could articulate the experience as precisely, never mind *playfully*, as Eggers.

Eggers could have made a fortune repeating the same entertaining self-indulgence, but he's shaped his career into anything but navel-gazing. He's formed writing workshops for kids; started two long-running magazines; cofounded an oral history book series on human rights crises; and written a string of beautiful, compassionate books of fiction and nonfiction with an unmistakably critical eye.

In his latest novel—*Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*—Eggers uses a dialogue-only form to tell a compact story that thunders with probity and timeless, existential urgency. The main character, Thomas. a



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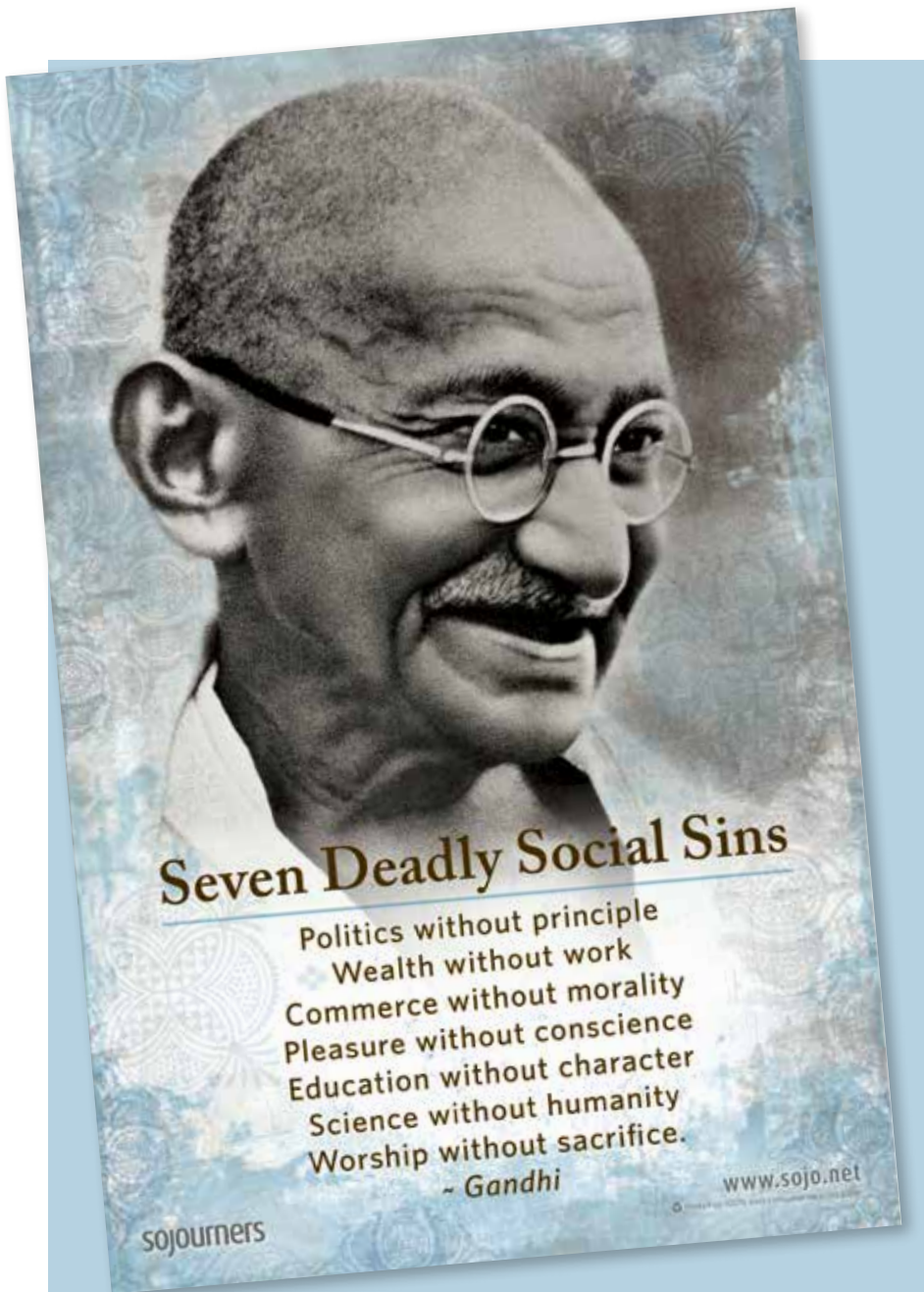
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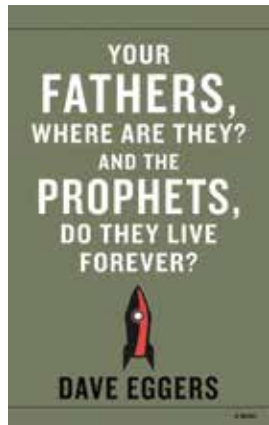
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middle-aged man with psychological issues, has conversations with six different kidnap victims—an astronaut, a former member of Congress and Vietnam vet, his high-school teacher, his mother, a policeman, and a woman he meets during walks on the beach—holding them on an abandoned military base on the California

coast. He doesn't physically harm any of them; he just wants to know where everything went wrong. Why do our friends die? Why do our career dreams come to naught? Why do the mythical promises of science, democracy, education, nationalism, law, progress, and even love fail to deliver?

It's not obvious that Thomas is insane, but he certainly is troubled, and not just as



Every generation asks afresh: Why must we suffer?

a gentle euphemism for “dangerous sociopath.” “We all think there must be someone very smart at the controls, spending the money, making plans for our schools, parks everything. But then its guys like you,” he tells the retired member of Congress, “who are just guys like me. No one has a ... clue.” Thomas is troubled by all of society's broken promises.

The tale is sparse, but it's not just an existential screed dressed up in a gimmicky novel. *Your Fathers* is like a follow-up to Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, with Thomas just as troubled by the same disappointments and failures as the prophetic/deranged Tyler Durden. But Thomas is only a shadow of the strutting, macho pugilist Durden. He would have never made it through the front doors of Durden's Fight Club.

Your Fathers reminds me even more of the book of Job. The hapless, poetic Job loses everything but his life for no good reason, and God responds to the problem

of suffering with the miracle of *being*. But God's long list of wonders doesn't make the raw suffering of existence go away. "Human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward." Every generation asks afresh: Why must we suffer?

[Spoiler alert!] In Eggers' tale, there is no voice of God in the end, only police bursting into the buildings to free the captives. "We're in here! Everyone's safe," shouts the retired member of Congress. "God, that sounds really horrible, doesn't it?" says Thomas. "Nothing in the world sounds worse than that, to be here and safe. Say it again. I don't think they heard you." The member of Congress repeats his call. "Jesus Christ," says Thomas. "That is the saddest thing I ever heard." The end.

Eggers has evolved into a genuinely

prophetic voice, reading the signs of the times, exposing modern idolatry and unquestioned hypocrisy, refusing, like Thomas, to feign consolation in the words "everybody's safe." His is the voice of an era that imagines itself to have outgrown the need for God but doesn't know how to get by without God. The closing, mournful cry of Thomas is a lament for the times, a bracing word to counter the false optimism of our politicians, the dehumanizing "reasonable margins" of economists, and the blind servitude of cultural leaders that worship the stillborn idol of moral progress. ■

Kurt Armstrong is a freelance writer from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, and the author of *Why Love Will Always Be a Poor Investment* (Wipf & Stock).

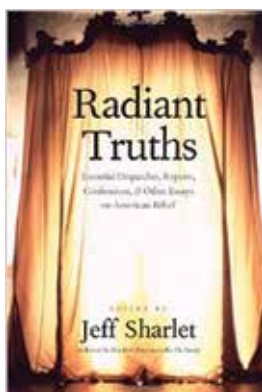
Reviewed by Brittany Shoot

FAITH'S POWER AND VARIETY

***Radiant Truths: Essential Dispatches, Reports, Confessions, & Other Essays on American Belief*, edited by Jeff Sharlet. Yale University Press.**

JEFF SHARLET, author of nonfiction books about faith including *New York Times* best-seller *The Family* and *Sweet Heaven When I Die*, isn't so much interested in religion as he is in belief. "That interest sometimes leads me to people who might reject the term *religion* altogether," he writes of drinking whiskey with Mormons and marching in Spain with Jewish-American veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a volunteer group of up to 40,000 men and women from 52 countries who traveled to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War.

In his newest book, *Radiant Truths*, Sharlet collects stories like these, stories about what happens when religious ideas meet social practice. He attributes this concept to anthropologist Angela Zito. In her essay "Religion is Media," Zito ponders, "What does the term 'religion,' when actually used by people, out loud, *authorize* in the production of social life?" Using Zito's question as a jumping off point, Sharlet



dives into 150 years' worth of literary journalism at the intersection of religion, culture, and politics.

He admits his own bias; as with most anthologies, his selections are personal favorites, and not wholly representative of the nation's religious pluralism. Sharlet also explains each selection in a short interlude between pieces, a helpful cohesion

if, like me, you read the book from front to back. Journeying from a 19th century Purim to a 20th century healing ceremony conducted by a traditional Laotian Hmong shaman is an exhilarating adventure, but one that requires a chaperone.

The anthology begins in 1863 with Walt Whitman, moving through the end of the 1800s with writing by Thoreau and Twain. The 20th century opens with a fierce female duo, Sara Jeannette Duncan and Jane Addams, writing about historic Hull House. By the middle of the last century, we've met boy preacher James Baldwin and been introduced to Louisiana voodoo by

Zora Neale Hurston.

As cultural revolution took hold in the 1960s and '70s, the groundwork was being laid for what was later dubbed "new journalism," the idea that reporters can also be subjects in the story—and the idea that trying to be objective, rather than immersed with one's sources, is perhaps impossible. This helps prepare readers to plunge into observant religious Judaism circa 1977 with

Sharlet collects stories about what happens when religious ideas meet social practice.

rock music and cultural critic Ellen Willis, and into late 1980s, pre-Jean Bertrand Aristide-as-president Haiti, when the liberal theologian was still a parish priest. Though it was published in 1995, Dennis Covington's dispatch about snake-handling county-fair preachers in Alabama feels timeless, as though it could have been written during any decade of the last century.

Sharlet also includes a piece of his own reporting on paganism in the Midwest circa 2000. But he holds up John Jeremiah Sullivan's 2004 *GQ* reporting on the Christian music Cross-Over Festival as one of the best pieces of religious journalism in years. He proclaims that "Upon This Rock" captures the first decade of this century as well as Joan Didion's *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* came to represent so much about the 1960s. And he's right.

Radiant Truths is a dizzying collection, not least because it might feel incomprehensibly broad without a gentle narrator to guide readers through decades of poetry, reporting, and reflections on social upheaval and subtle cultural shifts. It also pulls together a number of dense texts that require a graduate-level knowledge of world history and religious practice in order to fully appreciate the history collected here. Thankfully for us all, Sharlet offers his knowledgeable explanations along with thorough and thoughtful curation. ■

Brittany Shoot is a Sojourners contributing writer.

What We Carry With Us

IN THE LECTIONARY PASSAGES for these weeks following Pentecost, we find God working in and through the ordinary: a shepherd boy, bread, dancing. In each passage God breaks through with incredible revelation; some promise, some challenge, some person unexpected. Not everyone in the passages notices. Paying attention is crucial. We'll have to be open to being caught off guard, being surprised. The Holy Spirit gives us eyes to see. As we engage in leadership and ministry these weeks, what we are sure to find is Jesus showing up in all the places we might not expect, when we're washing dishes, driving in the car, eating a meal. And we certainly don't expect him in the faces of the white poor, in the lives of racially profiled black youth, or in the stories of the undocumented.

We bring into worship our vestments, our commentaries, our manuscripts. God speaks through these—no surprise there. But God *grips* us in these unexpected places. These are what we should carry with us into worship every Sunday. But we will need more than eyes to make them preach; we'll need power. The Holy Spirit gives that too. It makes the heart come alive. The gospel artist Fred Hammond said it best: "When the Spirit of the Lord comes upon my heart, I will dance like David danced!" Dancing and singing shape the heart of God's new community, for joy, for freedom, for hope. May we be open to the Spirit's vision and boldness!



Brandon Wrencher is pastor of Blackburns' Chapel United Methodist Church and director of The Blackburn House in Todd, N.C.

[JULY 5]

Shepherd or King?

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

REVERSAL IS CENTRAL to the way God works in the world. "The Lord said to [David]: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel" (2 Samuel 5:2b). David the shepherd boy, the youngest of eight, a social nobody, becomes the king of all of Israel. This is no

shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). In David, king *replaces* shepherd; in Jesus, true shepherd *is* king.

Jerusalem is domesticated, comfortable, and royal—"the city of David." Jesus' hometown is a joke ("Can anything good

Under the rule of the Holy Spirit, worship and politics are not conveniently divided.

mere human decision. To call David a shepherd is the Israelite leaders claiming to be making a decision about their new king in line with Yahweh's intentions from the beginning (see 1 Samuel 16:1-13).

The metaphor of shepherd is crucial. David's life and leadership is a mix of shepherd and wolf (2 Samuel 5:8; 12:1-4). Israel finds itself aspiring for what only God can provide (Psalm 123), whether that's a king or a shepherd—and we do the same. And God *does* provide, in Jesus. "I am the good

shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 1:46). He is a vagabond, no home, no possessions (Mark 6:6b-11). David is esteemed for his mighty acts and anointed king by "bone and flesh" (2 Samuel 5:1). Jesus is disdained and rejected by his own people and does nothing there worth talking about (Mark 6:1-6). David's campaign ridicules and excludes the marginalized (2 Samuel 5:8). Jesus' kingdom makes room for all, especially the outcasts, the sick, the poor, the prisoner, the stranger.

In Jesus we see the ultimate reversal, the

fullest embodiment of God's intentions for David, intentions that so easily escape us. We continue to search for kings with swords and castles and armies. Jesus rides on donkeys, waves olive branches, dies on a cross. He turns the world upside down.

[JULY 12]

Holy Ghost Dance

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 85:8-13; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

DANCING, SHOUTING, leaping. Sounds like a party! David and Israel are ecstatic at the recovery of the ark as a sign of Yahweh's endorsement of Israel's new monarchical direction. Ritual liturgy and political power kiss (Psalm 85:8-13). David rejoices, shouts, and dances "with all his might" (2 Samuel 6:14). It is a far cry from the monotone echo chambers found in much Western Christian worship.

Behind this liturgical extravagance, however, is discord between David and Michal, tension borne of power negotiations (2 Samuel 6:16-23). What will be the leadership style to represent Yahweh? Will it be Saul's old rule of strength, positioning, and domination or David's example of the lowly being exalted? David wins—which means we can all win. That God identifies with and includes the lowly, the nobodies, and the outsiders means we can all be God's people. Though David himself doesn't always live up to Yahweh's rule, the Spirit guarantees this rule by the joining of Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 1:12-14). A joining through the unity and peace made possible through Christ's breaking of hostile social barriers (Ephesians 2:11-22).

It is this rule, this order, this social possibility that is worthy of our praise (Ephesians 1:14b). Worship and politics are not conveniently divided. The Holy Spirit's boundary-transgressing love brings a community into existence that represents something altogether different from what the world can imagine: a family of radical love and welcome that relativizes the social distinctions determinative for this world (Ephesians 1:3-14). A different world is possible, built on something other than pride-motivated rules of exclusion and contempt (Ephesians 2:11-12; 2 Samuel 6:16).

Dancing and singing in God's new community demonstrate a different way to belong, a new way of doing politics. This is a public faith not unlike that of my African-American ancestors whose feet danced in the streets—not just in church—to a cappella singing of “We Shall Overcome.” Not just to the Hammond B-3 behind the hymnody, but to tunes of dissent. Return to *this* Holy Ghost dance—more Selma than shoutin’, more Ferguson than “fallin’ out”! Cornel West’s famous quote applies: “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

[JULY 19]

Home With God

2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Psalm 23;
Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

IN 2 SAMUEL, the Lord asks a pointed question: “Are you the one to build me a house to live in?” (7:5). One of the most fundamental of human mistakes is to think we can do God a favor. David thinks he can. So does the prophet Nathan. Our determinations to domesticate God are feeble attempts at control. “Our arms are too short to box with God,” so to speak. Yet still we try, with religious piety even. “Look,” David said, “I am living in a beautiful cedar palace, but the Ark of God is out there in a tent!” (2 Samuel 7:2, New Living Translation). God sees right through our power plays even when they’re cleverly disguised behind a veneer of religiosity. God cannot be domesticated. God will not be bound. Not by us, at least.

Because God doesn’t need a home: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Chosen One has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). God is free to choose to be bound. And God does choose. God makes a home for us (2 Samuel 7:11), for God’s own dwelling place (Psalm 23:6) is in our hearts (Ephesians 3:17). But only a heart that is free from ego, from the compulsion to control, can be at home with this God. A controlling heart is one that hides from self and neighbor, one that creates barriers to strangers and enemies, one that is distanced from God. God is determined to break such separations in the human heart.

In *Open Mind, Open Heart*, Father Thomas Keating puts it this way: “The chief

thing that separates us from God is the thought that we are separated from [God] ... We fail to believe that we are always with God and that [God] is part of every reality. ... The interior experience of God’s presence activates our capacity to perceive [God] in everything else—in people, in events, in nature.” God chooses to be bound to us, nailed to us even, as together we are “members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19-20). In the words of a poem for Archbishop Oscar Romero, “we are workers, not master builders.” God builds the only home suitable for God and all of creation. The old saying rings true: “Home is where the heart is.”

[JULY 26]

Bread or Junk Food?

2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 145:10-18;
Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN writes that “when the disciples, charged with feeding the hungry crowd, found a child with five loaves and two fishes, Jesus *took, blessed, broke, and gave* the bread. These are the four decisive verbs of our sacramental existence. Jesus conducted a Eucharist, a gratitude. He demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. Jesus is engaged in the sacramental, subversive reordering of public reality.”

The myth of scarcity is the belief that there is not enough to go around. The rich stay rich; the poor stay poor. It’s just the way

it is. Right? The vast majority of the world’s resources continue to disproportionately belong to an incrementally smaller percentage of the world’s population. The gap between rich and poor in the U.S. is worse than during the Great Depression. It’s easy to believe that resources are scarce, unless you have some sense of justice; unless you see budgets and economics as moral discourse.

Abundance is the way God has always operated (Genesis 1-2). Creation came into existence through the generosity of a self-giving, Trinitarian love. All of creation mirrors God’s own capacity for generosity, to give, to share. The capacity to share is made possible by a heart of gratitude, by a discerning mind that understands the notion of “enough.” The capacity for good, however, means there’s also capacity for evil. These are times when we are too short-sighted to see God’s provision, when we take what doesn’t belong to us, when we take violently, causing death—social and physical (2 Samuel 11:1-15).

This is all the more reason to pray. The Holy Spirit wants to pour out abundant gifts to satisfy our needs (Ephesians 3:16; Philippians 4:19). What we need most to sustain a capacity for generosity is that fuel that makes it go: the power of love. Brueggemann is relevant again: “When people forget that Jesus is the bread of the world, they start eating junk food—the food of ... Herod, the bread of moralism and of power.” If we avoid the junk food and eat the bread of love, then we’ll have food for all, so that none go hungry. That’s good news! ■

“Preaching the Word,” Sojourners’ online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.



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Two Guys Walk into a Bar

FOLLOWING IS a conversation between an aging, award-winning humor columnist and a young man who, in his short life, probably only earned an award for Most Tattoos On One Arm.

Me: Excuse me. What's that metal thing in your mouth?

He: It's an electronic cigarette.

Me: Dude, you can't smoke in here. Even if we're the only ones in this hotel bar, and although it harkens back to simpler times, a time when men were men, and ...

He: There's no smoke, just steam. It's a noncombustible cigarette.

Me: Cool phrase that, "noncombustible cigarette." Yours?

He: Nah. I heard it on a commercial. Some people call it an e-cigarette.

Me: Is that like e-mail? Or E. coli?



Ken Davis

When I get tired of talking to myself I talk to strangers. (Lucky strangers.)

He: No. E. coli is bacteria that are dangerous to your health, possibly fatal.

Me: Nothing in common with smoking, then.

He: Right. It's the latest thing, and it's helping me quit combustible cigarettes.

Me: That reminds me. Did you know that after the helicopter was invented, people had to start calling airplanes "fixed-wing aircraft." This little upstart invention changed the whole vernacular of the aviation industry. That makes me SO mad! Friggin' helicopters!

He:

Me: So, back to this cigarette. What's the point?

He: It delivers nicotine without second-hand smoke.

Me: Confining horrible medical

consequences to the user, and protecting innocent bystanders.

He: Exactly. Plus, we can do it anywhere we want, like here, for instance.

Me: As opposed to huddled in small groups outside doorways in the dead of winter.

He: Actually, I kinda miss that. We were cold, but we were happy.

Me: But aren't e-cigarettes just another reprehensible attempt by the tobacco industry to get young people addicted to their products? Did you know that two-thirds of new smokers start with e-cigarettes?

He: You just googled that, didn't you?

Me: Did not. Okay, maybe.

He: Hey, I don't defend it. I just use it because it contains slightly less nicotine, and it's better than the patch.

Me: Yeah, I guess if you meet somebody nice at a party, you can't very well pull out a box of nicotine patches, look her in the eye suggestively, and ask, "Patch?"

He: Nope. Plus, nobody ever bums an e-cigarette. I've just got the one.

Me: But don't you miss the rituals of smoking? The comforting physicality of unwrapping a crisp new pack, tamping it on the back of your wrist, then pulling out that first cigarette?

He: ... a little bit.

Me: And didn't you love the way a new pack filled out your shirt pocket? But then, when it dwindled to your last couple of cigarettes and shrank in size, didn't you feel less of a man?

He: Well, sometimes, but the e-cigarette ...

Me: And don't you miss how you'd breathe in that first puff, how it would expand your lungs with a deep satisfaction that plain oxygen could never give? Don't you miss that?

He: ... mouth's feeling kinda dry ...

Me: And I bet you miss how you'd tilt your head, squint one eye, and blow smoke out the corner of your mouth and away from a table mate. It was the courteous thing to do, plus it looked really cool.

He: Okay, I'm starting to get the shakes here ...

Me: But it's okay. Because you've got your little robot thingie to suck on, that cold, metal cylinder that looks like somebody tried to make an animal thermometer but got distracted. And ... hey, where are you going in such a hurry?

He: Must. Find. 7-Eleven.

Me: Oops. ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.



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